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STORIES



BEYOND THE STEEL WALL by JAMES IRA KENDAHL
Tough Metal Held The Secret of Planet Zero!

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fantasy

IN THE DECEMBER ISSUE OF:

fantastic



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Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

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the observatory

by The Editor



From the New York *Mirror*, August 15, 2155

Around the Universe with:

Walter Watchell

Dotty Dull, the bewoxtiful ingenue in "Angles Asway," who the critics say can't act, can't act. (They can't be wrong *all* the time!) . . . The local board of censors up in arms over two scenes in the Howard Chews flicker "Gin's No Sin." One is a rear shot of a dog crossing the street, the other shows a man actually talking back to a woman! . . . Take it from the National Health Bureau in Washington: no truth to the rumor that a Clifton (N. J.) woman is a rhinitis victim. Over seventy years since a documented case of that disease was reported. . . . Dejah Thoris, the Barsoomian beauty, is in town doing the night spots. Intimates say she's eggspecting again. . . . Look for plenty activity along 4D Row, now that Woowoo Lowbridge has consented to do pix. Measures 44 inches—and that's no bust! . . . Expect a sharp rise on Planets Pf. now that Mars is completely airconditioned. . . . Here's a laugh: the biggest importers of Pluto water are the inhabitants of guess which of the neighboring planets. . . . Bob Dope's new lit'ry tome: "Have Spacesuit, Must Travel" already a best seller. Over 1200 copies, say publishers Seemoan & Shooster. . . . Local vice squaddies busy stripping Times Square bookshops of under-the-counter copies of "Lassie." About a (shush!) female canine!

They're telling it along Park Avenue: A last-year's deb (Papa made ooooodles from Saturn's mines) finally met THE guy. It happened at La Vie en Sunflower a moon ago. Luv at first bite, since he's a real doll and

etc. They were introduced by Professor Armond Azimov, which should've been the Big Tipoff. The Prof. you see, is the inventor of the android—and the guy was his latest model. Now her ticker's busted. Like, sez she, being in love with a Bendix! . . .

Paul Fairman VIII, descendant of the famous poet of two centuries ago, has sued Roscoe Robin (he's the NBS-TV tycoon) for a cold millyun bus. Claims the lyrics for Robin's hit platters were lifted from his progenitor's poems (all of which were copyrighted in perpetuity). . . . It's triplets for the Cy Bernatic's. He's the mathematics whizz who personally turned Las Vegas into a ghost town a decade ago. . . .

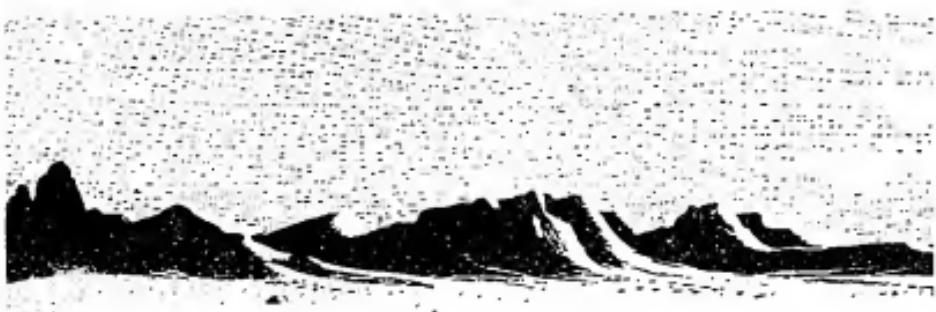
The latest concoction for the Lost-Weekend set has the Bellevue medics in a dither. Made by combining one part Betelgeuse brandy, one part Venusian vodka, three parts Kentucky sour-mash bourbon. Hangover: three weeks' total paralysis! . . . Backers of the Galaxian, swank new vacation resort on Andromeda, claim they'll recover their investment within one season, now the flight-time problem is licked. Once nine days, now twenty-six hours! . . .

TV's newest: "It's All Yours" near the top of Trendex. Five correct answers give you your own planet in the Cassiopeian constellation. But here's the rub: you'll need transportation—and the sponsor's product (no money down, five generations to pay) is spaceships! . . . The National Safety Council is plenty worried. For the first seven months of the year traffic fatalities for the nation number seventeen—a rise of four over the same period last year. "Remember: the life you save may be artificial!"

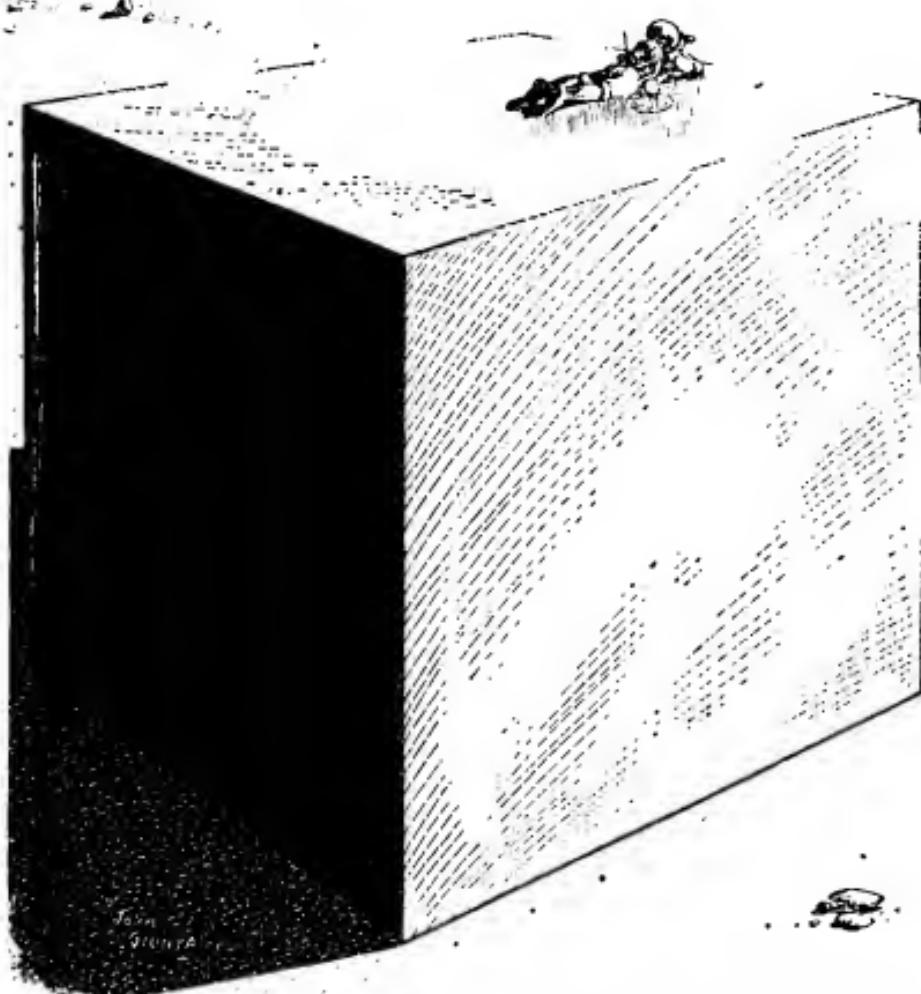
Vinolyte Vignette: Two years ago the sawbones gave him up. Too many radio-active cigarettes, they said, wagging their beards. Instead of putting in a hold order at the neighborhood crematorium, he put his problem in the lap of the DuPont white-coats. Today he's in perfect health, and his job as tobacco auctioneer calls for powerful lungs. He has them too—made from DuPont plastic!

A Paris couturier (dressmaker to you) has gone Too Far. Latest creation for milady actually covers upper part of body. Previewers call it scandalous! . . . No truth to rumor that the peanut-oil bomb could wipe out 8,000,000,000,000 square miles of the galaxy. One-fourth of that would be nearer the truth. . . . The Andre Livinggolightlyworth's are reaching for their rayguns again. Threaten to air it all in the courts. . . . Local gendarmes claim to be baffled by the recent painful passing of a Beekman Place gal-about-town. Any of the ESP boys on our staff can name the culprit. Today's stock-market tip: Consolidated Time Machine. Will Go Places!

—HB.



John Gutfreund



Behind powerful binoculars, sharp eyes studied the solitary figure.



BEYOND THE STEEL WALL

By JAMES IRA KENDAHL

BEYOND THE STEEL WALL

The long-dead hands of a man of mystery had fashioned this huge steel cube and set it in a sandy wasteland on a forgotten planet as a deadly challenge to every roving adventurer of Space. What lay behind its impenetrable surface, what fantastic secret did it shield? This was what Jason Welch meant to learn—even if it cost the life of the girl he loved!

HE ENTERED the place late, but not because he had been making the rounds, and he was stone sober. There had been times when he'd gone from bar to bar, drinking heavily, times of frustration and disappointment, when things had gone wrong and his goal seemed far away.

But now those times were past. He'd found the formula. Five years of trying and failing, of starting over only to fail again. Five years of single-minded drive toward one objective, and now he was over the hump. Of course, his objective still lay ahead, but the rest would be routine. From here out it would be the long glide home.

He told himself this—told it grimly—refusing to recognize the fact that it would not be a long glide home at all. That it would be rough and perilous and that he might die at any moment along the way.

The girl sat at a rear table

and he saw her instantly. Any man would have seen her, because a girl of her caliber in a Martian slum tavern was beyond belief. Even though she was flanked by two evil-faced Mercurian swamp men it was still inconceivable. The things that could happen to a girl of her type in a neighborhood like this were better not considered.

But it was no business of his and he walked over and leaned against the bar and began looking for what he had come here to find.

Men.

The barkeep was a Mercurian, with all the grotesque marks of such: the walled fish-eyes, the odd gaping mouth—and the treacherous heart that loved slaughter and agony more than anything else in the universe.

The Mercurian barman stood silent, eyeing the newcomer with a hatred that set the mood of the place. "A

glinza," the man said and the Mercurian sneered. A *glinza*. Plutonian hogwash suited only for weaklings.

But when the Mercurian had brought it, the man said, "I'm looking for a black crew," and that puzzled the barkeep. Weaklings did not inquire after black crews. He was new in the place and a little unsure of himself and he looked around at the host of evil faces. Their eyes were on the man and they could have told the Mercurian who he was, but in the Martian slums no one told anyone anything. So the Mercurian mumbled something and went back to thinking what would happen to the girl after she left if some bucko could figure out a way to kill the two Mercurian lizards. Or they might turn on her themselves. You could never trust those half-men. The thoughts of the girl's betrayal were pleasant and the Mercurian wandered away.

The man sipped his drink, his expression one of calculation. Then he whirled instinctively, set for defense. He lashed out a quick right at the vulnerable spot just below the throat. He missed by an eyelash and recovered his balance to get set for the lethal tail that would surely sweep around at him.

But no tail came. Instead, the Mercurian backed away, hissing softly and gestured toward the table at which the girl sat. He was one of her two guards. It could have been a trick to get him off-guard, but the man risked a quick glance in that direction and saw the girl beckoning to him. He did not move nor acknowledge the gesture. Not yet. Not until the guard turned and moved away with the odd snakelike stride that transmitted no motion from his short legs to his scaly body, making it seem that he moved on wheels.

Then only did the man follow—back through the tables — avoiding those that were crowded—until he was standing over the girl, looking down at her.

She was from Terra—one of his own race — and her beauty was that of the aristocrat, the patrician, the habitué of the smart Minneapolis cafes and the Arizona resort spots.

She smiled. "Thanks for coming over."

"Are you in some kind of trouble, Miss?"

"No."

"Then—"

"Won't you sit down?"

He dropped into a chair

keeping the Mercurians in front of him. "Thank you."

Her smile deepened. "Have you ever seen me before?"

"No. Why?"

"You looked at me from the bar as though you knew me."

"I know you're a fool."

"Why?"

"For coming to a place like this. For trusting those lizard men to guard you."

She was not offended and he allowed himself an unguarded moment to admire her lush figure, the brilliant glint of her hair, the deep brown of her eyes.

"Perhaps you're wrong on both counts," she said. "I'm here for a very good reason and these are very special Mercurians. They like luxury and I pay them far more than anyone else could afford."

"I'm glad to hear it." He half-rose. "Now, if there's nothing further . . ."

"But there is. I haven't told you my name."

"I'd be honored to hear it."

"Tanya Mackey. Please call me Tanya."

"Thank you. And now suppose you tell me exactly what you wish of me. A casual night? Are you hunting a guide through the rest of this hell-spawn Martian maze? Information?"

She continued to smile and

the nature of the smile baffled him. There was nothing of an amorous nature in it and yet she was obviously depending on her charms to hold him. But for what purpose?

"I'm rather busy—" he said.

"Of course, but there's no need to rush away. I'm your business of the moment."

"I don't understand."

The smile finally vanished. "I know who you are, Jason Welch."

If she expected a sharp reaction, she got none. "Quite a few people know who I am."

"I know a little more than all the rest."

"Imagine that," he said with marked disinterest.

"You're quite a figure along the planetary runs. I might even say a legend. You're the only man who has never given up trying to crack the Steel Box on Planet Zero."

"You still haven't said anything."

"Others come and they have their try at it and then they go their ways, knowing it's useless. Knowing that Welker's magic or science or whatever you wish to call it, was too great for them."

He smiled faintly. "You should write drama-tapes."

She ignored his interruption. "Knowing that when Welker went behind that steel

wall with his treasures and said no one would ever enter, he knew what he was talking about."

There was a time of silence when each seemed occupied with private thoughts, while a dark, saber-jawed Plutonian veered too close to the table and earned two sharp hisses from the Venusian guards.

Then the girl said, "Welker the traitor—Welker the monstrous assassin—Welker the slayer of a planet." She spoke in a low voice and there was something odd in her words and her look. The statements had been almost questions, spoken without conviction about the legendary genius who had withdrawn his science and the fruits of his great mind from the people of Planet Zero shortly after it came wandering out of space and found itself an orbit around Sol.

Jason Welch regarded Tanya narrowly. She had voiced the universal opinion of the scientist who had vanished into his refuge a hundred years before but he couldn't quite divine her purpose in so doing. "Are you looking for an argument?" he asked softly. "Are you hoping I'll challenge your statements?"

For the first time, she

seemed a trifle unsure of herself. Her laugh was a little self-conscious. "Perhaps I was."

"Why?"

"Because there are several opinions of Welker—several schools of thought as to why he did what he did. I was trying to discover which one you subscribe to."

"The answer is—*none*. My position is very simple, Miss Mackey—"

"—Tanya."

"Miss Mackey. I know that Welker took fifty million dollars worth of idrium into that steel box with him. I know it's still there. I don't care whether Welker was a saint or a devil. I'm interested only in the idrium. I've devoted the last five years of my life to getting my hands on it. *And I'm not going to fail.*"

It was Tanya's turn to regard him with speculation. "I understand you're quite a scientist in your own right, Jason."

His eyes threw sparks. "I did not give you permission to use my first name."

"An oversight on your part. Let me see — you've created six different formulae for cutting Welker's wall. Acid—fire—water—"

Jason Welch sprang to his feet. "I think we've had about

enough of this. Unless you're ready to get to the point."

"And now you've created a seventh—one that will work."

His reaction was far sharper than if she had slapped him across the face. His eyes blazed. But at that moment action from another direction took the spotlight.

The big Plutonian had returned and was retracing his steps back past the table. But this time his savage impulses got the better of his judgment and he turned swiftly to seize Tanya.

His move was made so quickly that it caught the two Mercurians off guard. With a concerted hiss, they lunged at the Plutonian but his huge paw had ripped away half of Tanya's blouse and the sight of her bare flesh sent fire through their treacherous brains.

Jason saw them hesitate and realized the hellish twist fate had taken. The Plutonian had Tanya in his grasp. The Mercurians would plunge at him with a mixture of emotions. Both loyalty and lust motivated them and regardless of the outcome, Tanya would be torn to pieces.

Jason acted instantly. Lifting the table, he hurled it at the two Mercurians bringing

them down in a writhing, hissing tangle. He knew they would be up quickly so he had no time for thought as he threw himself at the Plutonian. No opportunity for planning a strategy. Brute force would have to succeed or fail.

The Plutonian roared as he brought Tanya's body around for a shield. Jason's fist arced just past her head and smashed against the Plutonian's temple. It was the only comparatively vulnerable spot on an otherwise bullet-solid skull. His fist went numb as his knuckles connected with the bone-sheet underneath. He wondered if his hand were broken as the huge brute staggered backward, still holding the stunned Tanya.

The Mercurians were scrambling up on their short legs and Jason felt a surge of desperation. He lunged again at the Plutonian. If the latter had not been holding Tanya the odds would have been even further against Jason but thus impeded the savage brute was unable to protect his groin as she writhed and twisted herself away from him.

Jason kicked out instinctively. It was the only way to stop a Plutonian — the only really vulnerable spot a man could aim for. His boot

crashed into sensitive flesh and the Plutonian gagged horribly. Tanya slipped from his grasp.

The Mercurians were coming forward—but not toward the Plutonian. Their hot eyes were on Tanya. Jason whipped off his jacket and threw it around her shoulders. If that didn't work both he and Tanya were doomed. He could not defeat two Mercurians and a maddened Plutonian at the same time.

But with Tanya's body covered the completely unimaginative Mercurians came to a sudden halt. They had been moving in on a partially naked woman but now that woman was covered. Their lust was instantly drowned in thirst for battle and they whirled, spitting, on the Plutonian giant.

In swift merciless concert, they brought him down with the stinging, lethal poison in their tails. Hardened as he was and no matter how much the Plutonian may have deserved such a fate, sight of it sickened Jason and he turned Tanya's head away.

It seemed a long time before the Plutonian's howls of agony diminished to slobbering moans and ceased completely. "It's all right," Jason said. "It's over now. I'll take

you to safety. You shouldn't be here. You belong back on terra."

Tanya clung to him. "No—no. You've got to take me with you to Planet Zero. You've got to take me with you."

Jason drew back and looked into her eyes. Here truly was an amazing woman. Pulled freshly back from the brink of a horrible death, her mind still clung tenaciously to what was obviously her primary objective. The reason she'd no doubt gone from tavern to tavern seeking him out.

He shook his head in wonder. "Any other woman would be satisfied to come out of this with a whole skin but you—you don't seem to care about that. Tell me—why is it so important that you go to Planet Zero with me? In fact—how did you find out I'm planning to go there? How did you find out about the seventh drill I've perfected?"

"I paid for the information. I got it the same way Karkis the Venusian got it. He—"

Jason was again transformed by surprise. "*Karkis*—" His fingers bit into her shoulders and she cried out in pain. "Please—please! You're hurting me. Can't we go somewhere and talk?"

Jason's narrowed eyes flit-

ted around the tavern. The preceding incident had been observed by fifty lustful animals in varied states of development. Fifty vari-formed and weird-brained entities in whom violence, cruelty, and lust were the prime emotional motivations. They had seen Tanya's naked flesh and she was marked in their eyes.

"If we can make it," Jason said grimly. "Can you control your Mercurians?"

"I think they'll be all right now."

"All right. We'll try to leave."

It was a tense hair-trigger interval while they moved slowly toward the door. At any moment Jason expected one or more of the tavern scum to lunge at Tanya. The Mercurians walked backward as a vanguard, their eyes bright with murder, their minds inviting attack — hoping for it. Their menacing hisses filled the tavern.

Out in the dark street, Jason moved from light to light hoping for the best. He could not walk backwards facing the Mercurians nor could he allow them to walk in front and leave the rear unprotected.

He could only keep himself between them and Tanya as he hurried her along expecting momentarily to feel the

lethal sting of a death-dealing tail.

But the Mercurians — like bad dogs punished — were behaving, and Jason hoped it would last until they could reach his hotel . . .

It did. In the non-violent atmosphere of Jason's room, the Mercurians dropped docilely into a corner and appeared to go to sleep.

Jason said, "You can clean up a little while you're here. Then I'll take you wherever you want to go."

His statement was really a question, an inquiry as to where she was staying. But there was no answer. Instead, Tanya huddled into his jacket and said, "I thought you might take me to your laboratory."

"No one goes to my laboratory. No one knows its location. No one ever will until I can get into the Steel Cage."

A lot of her confidence was gone. Yet her tenacity of purpose seemed as strong as ever. "Someone knows."

"Who?"

"Karkis the Venusian."

"That's absurd."

"You had a helper who proved traitorous."

"Marko? He was killed."

"But before he died, he talked to Karkis."

"That's not true. You're trying to evade the issue, but now I want some answers. Why did you seek me out in the taverns? Why were you waiting for me in that place? What's this absurd business of your going to Planet Zero with me?"

Tanya smiled as though she were again on safe ground. "Why I want to go isn't important. What matters is that you will take me."

"Why?"

"Because you have no money to hire a ship and recruit a crew. No matter how black they are—they have to be paid."

"How do you know I'm broke?"

"Does it matter? It's true isn't it?"

He pondered. Yes it was true. "All right. But it makes no difference. I have the torch and there is plenty of wealth behind the steel wall. A handful of dust containing enough power to run a planet for a million years. The crew I find will wait."

"They will *not* wait. Word has gone out from Sol to the Pole Star that your last crew was not paid."

Jason scowled. "They went in with their eyes open. They took their chances along with me."

"And how many have tried to kill you since?"

"That makes no difference either. There are always hot heads trying to kill someone for fancied wrongs. I can still get a crew."

Tanya came close to him and laid her hands on his shoulders. She smiled into his eyes with almost a tenderness. And with a wisdom that seemed beyond her years. When she spoke it was as though to a child. "Jason Welch, you are a strange man. A strange mad genius. You have overcome many obstacles. The power of your obsession has carried you far. But even iron-willed geniuses can finally go no further against impossible odds."

"What are you getting at?"

"Accept my offer," she said tensely. "For once do it the easy way. My terms are not harsh. I only wish to accompany you." Her lips were close to his. Her eyes were warm. "Accept my offer. Accept me also," she added huskily, "if it will help to sway your decision."

He fought to keep her from knowing how much he suddenly wanted to reach for her—to take her in his arms. In order to keep from doing so, he pushed her roughly away.

"You called me a strange man. I say you are an even stranger woman."

She was not offended by his brusqueness. Her Mona Lisa smile remained. "Possibly. You see, I too have an obsession."

"I gathered that but I've been unable to define it."

"It's not important now. What is your decision?"

He made it as he made all decisions. Suddenly and definitely with no backward look. "How much money do you have?"

"Enough."

"For a ship? I lost my last one."

"Yes."

"Enough for a crew, so they will not demand shares in the venture?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll get a ship and start recruiting tomorrow."

"Wonderful."

He regarded her morosely. "But there will still be peril. Peril for you. The crew will still have to be black. Only reckless renegades who care nothing for their lives or their souls will venture anywhere near the Steel Box on Planet Zero."

"I'm well aware of that."

Jason glanced at the dozing Mercurians. "Where are you staying?" He knew without

asking that Tanya did not live on Mars. No decent person resided on this scum planet of the universe.

"At the Space Port Hotel."

"You'd better stay here for the night. You'll be safe enough. I'll get you a room and keep your guards here with me."

"Whatever you think best. I'll—"

Her words were interrupted by a sharp knock at the door. Jason glanced over questioningly, then walked to the dresser and took a small ray gun from the drawer. The Mercurians hissed softly and switched their tails.

"Come in," Jason called out, in a quiet voice.

The door swung open and a huge arrogant-looking man walked in. His physical structure was little different from that of Jason, except that his mouth was a slash of pure cruelty and his eyes deep pools of venom. This was quite natural, because Venusians and Terrans were much alike. There had been a civilization on Venus aeons before the Terrans came up out of the mud. Jason's visitor, Karkis of Venus, was a product of a terrible culture that lived for greed and cruelty and honored the brutal.

"What do you want here?" Jason asked.

Karkis glanced at Tanya with quick disdain. "Well, I see you have a woman with you."

His inflection made plain what he considered Tanya to be and Jason tensed in quick anger to spring at his enemy. But Tanya caught his look. She made a restraining motion that deepened Jason's scowl but held him back for an instant.

Then Karkis, who had been measuring the two Mercurian lizard men, turned toward the door and snapped his fingers. Immediately there entered two astrodites—a pair of the deadly, needle-toothed creatures that inhabited the cosmic dust specks in the far reaches of space. They were the strongest creatures in existence, thewed and muscled beyond any other known physical structure. Their hides were thick and their claws razor sharp. Their fangs were long and hollow, each one being a hypodermic needle that spewed forth a poison even deadlier than that of the Mercurians.

As they entered the room, Karkis motioned them into an empty corner. They obeyed, snarling, their cruel little eyes on the Mercurians. But their

hatred was returned with a vengeance. The Mercurians, completely devoid of imagination, cared nothing for superior odds. That an astrodite usually killed a Mercurian made no difference whatever to them. They crouched in their own corner, enthusiastically adding their own quota of hate and battle lust to the overcharged atmosphere.

"I hope you can keep your lizard men under control," Karkis said lightly. "I'd hate to have my guards tear them to pieces."

"What do you want here?" Jason snapped.

Karkis regarded him with obvious contempt. "I came to do you a favor."

"I want no favors from you."

"Nevertheless, I think you ought to listen."

"Talk fast—then get out of here."

Tanya quieted the hissing of the Mercurians with a gesture of her hand and Karkis said. "I've come to offer a truce—to suggest that we join forces. There is enough wealth in the Steel Box for both of us and I've decided to be generous."

"Amazing!" Jason said with elaborate sarcasm.

"Not at all. I'm just a man, willing to be magnanimous to

a defeated enemy. And I have defeated you, Jason Welch."

"You have?"

"Consider. You cower here in this stinking planet, a beaten man. Your credit has been utterly demolished. You talk of buying a ship and signing a crew when you can't even pay your hotel bill. You are through, Jason Welch — through."

Jason's hot blood boiled to the surface. "Why you arrogant—"

He was on the point of acquainting Karkis with the new state of his fortunes when again Tanya's restraining look caught his eye. Jason was perplexed, not being the type of man who dealt in intrigue or clever maneuverings. His was a forthright nature and he was motivated by truth.

But he had developed a respect for this strange girl who had accosted him only a few hours before and he checked himself and readjusted his countering words.

"I see, Karkis. It does look bad, doesn't it? Tell me—so long as you're completely at the controls, why do you bother with me at all? Why offer a merger? What could I possibly contribute?"

Karkis' grating laugh was

meant to be comradely but it missed the mark. "I don't really know myself. It must be my inherent sympathy for my fellow man. At any rate, I believe you can contribute something. You have a primitive skill in the sciences that may come in handy. Also, you are an excellent fighting man and, frankly, I'd rather have you with me than against me."

"Well, thank you," Jason said, almost enjoying this absurd game himself. "But there is one little point you seem to have overlooked."

"And what is that?"

"Just how do you plan to cut through the steel wall? You've tried for years and failed. Do you by chance think the wall has softened up in the meantime?"

Karkis laughed. "I think you'll find I've solved that little problem."

Jason could stand no more. "Get out!"

"Then you refuse my offer?"

"It's too absurd to rate a refusal. Get out!"

Karkis' cruel face darkened. "Be careful how you talk, Jason Welch. One movement of my finger and I could end our feud here and now. One signal from me and my astorites would demolish this room and you with it."

"You're welcome to move

your finger any time you wish. Mine will move also and you won't be here to see the fight."

Karkis scowled and seemed to be measuring the situation. But while doing so, it went swiftly out of his control. Both the astrodite pair and the two Mercurians sensed the hostility between the Venusian and the Terran and their savage spirits rose to it. The Mercurians took up their hissing and moved slowly from their corner. The astrodites snarling invitingly and moved forward also.

Every muscle in Jason's body tightened. If the four hurled themselves into battle, no one in the room would survive. Of that he was certain.

Still, he might have welcomed a final showdown with Karkis if it hadn't been for Tanya. With her in mind he said, "Don't be a fool, man. A fight among those beasts will prove nothing. Get them out of here while there is still time."

Karkis hovered between two forces. His enjoyment at seeing Jason plead and his own fear of a battle's consequences. He waved a casual hand. "Very well. I'll be agreeable." He turned a stern eye on his two guards. "Down, Mastis! Hold, Tampus! The time is not yet. You will have

your feast of blood. I promise you. But the time is not yet."

The astrodites responded only partially. They were slowed down, but they still circled toward the willing Mercurians.

A sudden fear of consequences paled Karkis' handsome face. "Hold your own beasts," he snarled. "Control them or we'll be drowned in blood!"

Tanya motioned sharply at the Mercurians while Jason chuckled. "No stomach for it when the chips are really down, eh, Karkis?"

The Mercurians crawled, hissing, back into their corner and the two astrodites turned sullenly toward the door. "Out—out!" Karkis barked. When his brace of guards had gone, Karkis turned to Jason for a final word. "You'll die, Terran. Now your death will be more horrible than you can imagine. I will no longer restrain myself. Beware the next time we meet."

Then Karkis was gone and the Mercurians slowly subsided. Jason said, "Why did you signal me? Why didn't you let me tell him the truth?"

Tanya, a trifle pale from their close brush with death, said, "With such as Karkis it is better not to reveal the na-

ture of your weapons. Against him, a secret in your own mind could well be a weapon in itself."

Jason realized the wisdom of her words and spoke out with all the honesty of his nature. "Of course you're right. We'll win through, Tanya. You and I together. We'll make it."

But Tanya did not respond with enthusiasm. There was a troubled look on her face. "Karkis bothers me," she said. "What has he got up his sleeve?"

"Nothing but his arm. His offer of a partnership is proof of that. He realizes that he is defeated."

Tanya shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. I don't think he came here to offer you a partnership at all."

"But he did just that!"

"I know—but—"

"Then why—?"

"I think he came here to gloat. His offer was merely his way of showing his contempt. The Venusian mind works that way. And if I'm right, he moved from strength, not weakness. Some turn of events has—"

Jason smiled and took Tanya's hand. "You're being pessimistic without cause now. I tell you we've won and there is nothing left to do but col-

lect our reward. We'll be rich, Tanya! We'll be the wealthiest Terrans in the universe!"

She did not draw away, but there was a sadness in her eyes, Jason thought, as she turned them full upon him. "You're certain, Jason," she said, "that the wealth in the Steel Box is what you really want?"

He was astounded. "Of course! What else?" When she did not reply immediately, he asked, "Tanya, what's on your mind?"

"Something rather peculiar, perhaps. I was thinking of Welker — Welker, the genius of Planet Zero."

"Why of him?"

"I don't know, but there are questions that come to my mind."

"What questions?"

"Welker himself. What kind of a man do you suppose he was?"

As Jason continued to hold Tanya's hand and look into her eyes, a strange, vague question came into his own mind. A question concerning Tanya. Her manner. The way she had made her queries. It came to him in the form of a baseless premonition that she was not really inquiring about Welker at all, but about Jason Welch; as though she was try-

ing to find out things about Welch rather than the long-dead Master of Planet Zero.

But his feeling was too baseless for comment. He said, "Welker? Who knows? There are no records. Only legend, and legend makes him several kinds of a man."

"Only legend," Tanya pursued. "Then how do we know there is really any wealth in the Steel Box? Unless we really know why Welker, at the height of his power and glory, suddenly sealed himself off from his world and died in his steel trap, how can we know what he took inside with him?"

"That's pretty obvious isn't it? It's more than legend that all the idrium on the planet disappeared with him. Where else could it have gone?"

"But why—why? Why did he do what he did?"

Jason shrugged. "Who knows? Who cares? We aren't going after his bones. We're going after wealth and I know it's there. I have no doubt on that subject."

They appeared to become conscious of their contact at the same moment. Jason dropped Tanya's hand and she drew back, regarding him with just the touch of a flush on her beautiful face.

Jason turned briskly away.

"Well, sleep is in order now. I'll arrange a room for you."

After he put the phone down, he turned and saw a sheaf of money lying on the bed. Tanya said, "You'll need that if what Karkis said was true."

Jason flushed. "I'm afraid it is."

She smiled and there was a fondness, even a tenderness in the smile. "You *are* quite a man, Jason Welch. Planning to get a ship and hire a crew without money enough to pay your hotel bill."

"I've been broke before, but something always managed to turn up."

"And it turned up this time, too, didn't it?"

There was warmth in the smile with which Jason Welch answered her. And between them there sprang a sudden understanding that in itself was strange for Jason because in reality he knew nothing of this girl—nothing of her motivations, her ambitions, her secret thoughts. He had not the least idea of why she would risk death to go with him to Planet Zero. Yet he knew she was well aware even as he that death could be their destiny more easily than not. A strange woman.

"Goodnight," Tanya said, "and let us pray that my sus-

pitions of Karkis are unfounded."

He looked at her searchingly. "You feel they are very well founded indeed, don't you?"

"I know they are," Tanya said. "That's one of the reasons I'm leaving my Mercurians here. Karkis could strike while you sleep. And he would if he thought he could be successful."

Before Jason could reply, Tanya was gone.

There was a hiring hall in Metropolis, the largest of all Martian cities. It was located near the space port and there came the hopeful and the disillusioned, the good and the bad, the righteous and the damned; all who were ready, for one reason or another, to sign on for another turn around the planets.

And to the hiring hall came Jason Welch. He selected an empty table and sat down behind it. He laid a stack of money before him: green Terran bills, purple Venusian currency, the bright orange specie notes used on Pluto and Neptune, the crimson currency of Mars itself.

Jason waited, but not long. Sight of the money brought the covetous of all the planets flocking hungrily around him.

"What flight you making?"

"Planet Zero."

"No."

"Good wages. Good food. Bonus on the return."

"Planet Zero? I'm no black spaceman."

The term *black* referred to a crewman with the reckless courage, or the lack of good sense, to travel anywhere, to go into any situation however hazardous for financial gain. In short, a man in the black void beyond the law.

Naturally a skipper could not be selective in gathering such a crew. He had to take what he could get and damn the consequences. Few of even the most desperate would sign onto a black voyage.

As Jason sat waiting, they came close to sniff hungrily at the money, then backed away. Finally a big upland Mercurian snatched the pen. "Planet Zero? Only hell-hole in the universe I ain't been to. How much of a binder?"

"Martian?"

The Mercurian, more advanced on the evolutionary scale than Tanya's two guards, had no hiss in his voice. His stinger was less lethal but that did not make him less dangerous. He had a cunning brain which was more deadly than the equipment of the lower-scale Mer-

curians. "Sure Martian?" he growled with belligerence. "What else can a man spend in this devil's stronghold?"

"A hundred brots for a night's fling. We blast tomorrow at fourteen. The ship is in Pit Twelve. Be there."

"You doubting my honesty?"

"No. I just said be there."

The Mercurian took his money and shouldered off and the uninitiated might have found it strange—these desperadoes speaking of honesty. But strangely, even the lowest had an integrity where boarding a ship was concerned. They would take a skipper's money and go off for a last orgy but they would be at the pit for blast-off. Thus, Jason would hand out binding money to any man signing on. And if he failed to show the following morning, Jason would know he was dead in some Metropolis sink hole. That was the only risk he took.

After the Mercurian made his mark and left, the ice of caution broke somewhat and others followed suit. Rather slowly, however, and it was noon before Jason had his roster full.

When the last man made his mark and shuffled off with his binder, Jason gathered up

what money was left and quit-ted the hall. As he passed the blasting pits an early ship was just signallng to clear and Jason stopped to watch.

There was something familiar about the big silver liner. It was a Spaatz Five, a ship with many excellent qualifica-tions. A favorite of the more lawless space navigators in that it had speed and the ca-pacity to lift heavy loads. That made it an ideal base for both defensive armament and of-fensive weapons.

Jason turned to look across the pits to where his own Compex Star Rover lay wait-ing. He had acquired it early that morning—bought it for cash — and now a thrill of pride went through him. The Star Rover was the fastest craft in existence. It could drive right up to the point where Time itself began to bend and from there out a man had to watch his step or it would begin ripping through years instead of space, turn-ing itself into a flying coffin filled with mouldering bones. It did not carry the armament of a ship like the Spaatz but it still had enough to blow holes in a fair-sized asteroid.

Jason turned his attention back to the Spaatz. Its tubes were heating now and it was about ready to go. Jason

frowned. There was something— Then he remembered. Of course! Karkis' new ship. He had heard of Karkis buying a new Spaatz so this had to be it. No one else would bring such a beautiful gleaming monster to a place like Metropolis.

Jason pondered. Why was Karkis blasting off at this time? He hadn't given up the fight. That was ridiculous. Men of Karkis' caliber never gave up the fight. So why was he not waiting until Jason made his move? What could the arrogant Venusian gain by going off ahead?

There seemed only one logical answer. Karkis was going to make his stand on Planet Zero. When Jason set down near the Steel Box, he would find Karkis waiting for him. Jason considered this at length, then shrugged. It had always been his policy to cope with problems when coming face-to-face with them. A man who looked too far ahead, he had found, walked too slowly and never arrived at his objective. He watched the big Spaatz thunder off into the sky and then returned to the hotel.

He found Tanya still in her room where he knocked on her door. When she called out, he identified himself. "Just a moment," she replied and then

opened the door, presenting a figure that made even the pre-occupied heart of Jason Welch skip a beat.

Tanya wore a clinging robe that revealed the lines of her magnificent body. In space-man's rig, this would be pretty much hidden and it seemed, with the true instincts of a woman, she saw nothing wrong in revealing some of her charms to the man in whom she had become more interested than she cared to admit. "Please come in," she said.

Jason passed close to her, walked through a heady aura of perfume and said, "The coffee looks good."

It was in Tanya's heart to ask, *is that all that looks good?* But she substituted a tender smile directed at his back and said, "I thought you would welcome a cup on your return."

Jason sat down with a sigh of satisfaction. "The crew is signed. The ship is ready. We blast at fourteen."

She poured his coffee without comment but she was not unconscious of his now-linger-gaze and the knowledge of it warmed him. "Tanya—" he said.

"Yes."

"I have a favor to ask."

"Anything, Jason."

"Give up this cruise. Please do me this favor. It's unthinkable that I take such a beautiful woman—such a person as you into what could easily be death—or worse."

She teased him. "Worse?"

"I've signed a crew of scum, Tanya. The only kind of a crew I could get. These men have no morals, no scruples, only vicious appetites they will satisfy at any cost. Controlling them will be hard. It will be the kind of cruise where a skipper could suddenly find himself without control—at the mercy of his crew. It has been known to happen often where black spacemen are involved. Listen to me. Please don't go."

She laid a quick hand on his cheek. "You're very sweet to think of me so protectively, but I must go. And I have every confidence in your ability to protect me."

"Thank you, but—"

"And if things go wrong—if the crew turns mutinous—" Tanya shrugged. "—I must face what I must. I told you, Jason, that I too am dedicated."

"But to what cause? You don't need the money this cruise will bring you."

"That is true. And if I did need it I still would not be in-

terested in doing what I will have to do for money."

"Then why—?"

She laid a fingertip over his lips and smiled. "There will be a time for that question. Now I have one."

"Yes?"

"The torch. Your new invention for cutting the steel wall. We will take it with us, of course."

"Naturally."

"But you have made no move to get it."

"That won't take long. It's in my laboratory."

"And where is this laboratory?"

Jason's smile bore no suspicion or rancor. In fact there was a certain tenderness in it. "Like all women, a mystery annoys you, doesn't it?"

"No, it isn't that. But so much depends on the torch."

"Everything depends on it, but I tell you, the torch will work. It is built on a new—or rather a different principle from that of my others."

"What principle?"

"Sound. It controls and supercharges sonic vibrations. I should have used this principle long ago, knowing as I did what a genius Welker was. He would not allow any of the known methods to be successful in penetrating his protecting wall."

"But sonic power has long been known."

"Yes, but its ultimate potentials are a comparatively recent discovery—I mean actual development and control of these potentials."

"But how can you be so sure the torch will penetrate the wall? You haven't actually tried it on Welker's steel."

"The answer to that is possibly too complicated for your pretty head. It has to do with theoretical mathematics. I evolved a progression of equations after I'd perfected the torch. This progression, while it hadn't shown me how to build the torch, did prove to me that no metal or composition of metals can withstand its sonic force."

"Welker must have known that also."

"Beyond all doubt, but even a genius of his caliber could not do the impossible. Welker was still human and whatever problem one man presents, another can solve."

There was respect, even a touch of awe in the way Tanya regarded Jason. "In many ways, you are as great a genius as was Welker."

Jason chose to react lightly, banteringly. "In many ways? Tanya! I'm hurt! Why not in all ways?"

But she did not respond lightly. Her answering look was somber—even a little sad. "In all ways but one, Jason Welch. In all ways but the most important."

He leaned forward sharply. "You've said too much or too little. Go on."

But Tanya now hid behind a facade of lightness. She smiled. She got suddenly to her feet and did a quick circling dance step. The motion whirled the skirt of her robe away to reveal slim luscious legs, the barest flash of creamy thighs. "Enough of serious talk. I have a demand to make, Jason Welch."

"What demand, Tanya?"

"We must celebrate our success up to this point. I want to dance! For a few brief hours I want to forget what lies ahead and feel the arms of a man about me. Your arms, Jason Welch. I want to dance! To be whirled up to the stars!" She came close to him in sinuous grace. She bent swiftly and her lips brushed his cheek. "And perhaps a kiss or two," she whispered. Then she was again out of reach.

Jason Welch would have had to be a man of stone not to respond. Suddenly he was looking at Tanya through new eyes. He was not a man whose

heart was touched easily. His integrity was too great to allow him to enter a light love affair. But his feeling for Tanya was as close as a man of his caliber could come to love in such a brief time.

He said, "But you should sleep—rest—"

"I don't want to rest. Too soon we may both face the sleep of eternity where there are no kisses, no dancing." Her smile was gay. "I command you, Jason Welch."

He sprang to his feet. "I obey. There is a good enough orchestra in this hotel."

"We'll dine and dance under the stars."

"Then, when it's time, we'll go after the torch together. You've wanted to see my laboratory. You shall."

"Thank you, Jason Welch." Her quick gay kiss had in it both the light touch of a child and a trace of the warm passion of a woman. Then Jason Welch was returning to his room with his feet not quite touching the floor.

At thirteen, Jason knocked on Tanya's door. She opened it, revealing herself to be dressed for the street but still flushed with the misty warmth generated from the evening and the night of gayety. They had danced until very late.

"Ready?" Jason asked.

"Ready."

"Tired?"

"Not in the least."

"Then we'd better hurry."

Unconsciously, Jason patted the ray gun in his pocket. This gesture was both an assurance and a tribute to the viciousness of the pre-dawn streets through which they would pass. "I'd rather you remained here," Jason added.

"But you promised."

"In a rash moment," he said ruefully. "Well, come on. But stay close to my side."

They went out into the darkness. The street lights were dim and half of them did not function. Jason carried also a small pocket light but he preferred not to use it unless absolutely necessary because it could attract danger.

He moved with the sureness of one familiar with the setting. They went as quietly as possible through dark brooding streets where every shadow could be deadly, every small sound the prelude to lethal attack. Rounding one corner, Jason's foot struck a yielding object. He reacted in a flash. Springing backward, he carried Tanya with him as he jerked the ray gun from his pocket and flashed the light. He held the light at arm's length, focusing it on

the danger spot from an angle and thus not putting himself directly behind it as a perfect target.

The light picked out a hideous form stretched on the walk. Only by interplanetary law could it have been rated as human. It had four arms and a scaly hide that gleamed in the light of the torch. It was completely naked.

Jason lowered his gun. "It's all right. A Uranian caveman but he's harmless."

"H-h-harmless?" Tanya breathed.

"Yes. Don't look. His throat has been cut. He's been robbed and stripped." Jason flashed off the light and guided Tanya around the monstrosity.

They moved on until Jason pressed Tanya to a halt. "Quiet now," he whispered. He waited for a few moments, listening for any indicative sounds. "I may want to use the laboratory again sometime," he whispered. "I want no one to discover its location."

After a few more moments he said, "I guess we're in the clear," and flashed his light downward against a sewer grate. Then he turned the light off and bent over and there was a sound of metal rasping on rock. "I'll go down first and catch you," he said.

Then he called softly from

below. "All right. Ease yourself down. I'm here. Don't be afraid."

Tanya went through the sewer opening and into Jason's arms where she clung for a moment. She felt rather than saw his quick smile as he said, "Not the sweetest-smelling place on Mars, is it? The stench helps though. Serves as a barrier against snoops. This way."

In mute wonder, Tanya followed through labyrinthian passages until he stopped and turned his torch on what appeared to be a solid brick wall. But the quick manipulation of one brick changed that. A crack appeared in the wall as one section became a door and slowly opened.

Tanya saw the beginning of a narrow stairway as Jason said, "This is it—one of the cells in an old Martian prison built centuries ago and now abandoned and forgotten. I learned of it from a very old man whose grandfather was a prisoner here. The place is completely isolated and no one knows of its existence. An ideal place to carry on secret research work."

But it seemed that someone else did know of the hidden laboratory. As Jason moved down the steps following the

thin beam from his torch, there was a sudden savage roar of hatred and the torch was knocked from his hand.

"Someone's in here" Jason yelled. "Go back! Go back!"

He had time only for this warning before the great weight of a hurtling body bore him to the brick floor and Tanya's cry of fright was drowned in the hideous roar that came from the intruder's throat.

Jason fought as he had never fought before. The strength of sheer desperation helped him to turn his body and save his exposed throat from the snap of lethal tusks.

His hands went out, seeking the throat of the other, and he wondered what manner of man or beast he was fighting. The obvious came into his mind even while occupied with the treacherous business of staving off death. This creature with which he was faced was not of a humanoid class. That was self-evident. It was some monstrosity from one of the sub-human races—one of the races possessing only the elemental instinct to slay.

Therefore it had been left in the laboratory by some more intelligent being for the purpose of doing away with Jason Welch. By Karkis the Venusian, of course.

But Jason had no further time to wonder about that phase of the situation. The beast he grappled with had at least four arms, maybe more. It was covered with both thick matted hair and the scales of a reptilian specie. A set of razor-sharp claws found the flesh of Jason's thigh and sliced in. Jason flailed out savagely and evidently found a mark near the throat because the creature gagged, screamed shrilling and lost its hold on Jason's own throat.

Jason drove another fist out viciously but missed a vital mark. He succeeded in driving the beast backward however, even though his own knuckles went numb from the contact.

Taking instant advantage of the retreat, Jason turned like an eel, got clear and came to his feet. The beast hesitated before renewing the attack and Jason clawed for the ray gun in his pocket.

But it was gone. It lay somewhere on the dark floor of the old cell and Jason cursed himself for criminal carelessness—for entering without his torch in one hand, his gun in the other and every sense alert.

The path of retreat was open however, because the intruder was on the far side of

the cell and thus did not block Jason's exit. Jason backed away warily.

Here, on the threshold of success, he was being thwarted by a slobbering beast left to take his life. With the knowledge of this, he went momentarily mad and hurled himself at the unknown creature.

Jason Welch should have died then and there as a result of his recklessness. But in his rage he found the strength of several men, found a power that would not be denied. He also fortunately found the vulnerable spot on the beast—evidently its throat—aimed a blind kick in the inky darkness. The kick, swung viciously from the hip, went home—brought a sickening scream of agony that chilled even Jason's hot blood.

Then he knew the beast was down and he drove in and found a huge pulsing vein. His hand clawed in like a talon and ripped the vein from its fleshy seat and a river of hot blood washed over him. The monster's scream tapered off into a gurgle and the huge pile of flesh and bone twitched and lay still.

Jason blacked out for a moment, there on the hard floor. Then he heard Tanya's fright-

ened voice: "Jason—Jason—Oh, my darling! Where are you? Where are you?"

"Here," he gasped. "Don't be afraid. The thing is dead."

He heard her cry of relief and she was helping him to his feet. "Careful, Jason, careful. Lean on me. You may be hurt. Lean on my shoulder."

"I'm not hurt. There—the light. Feel along the wall."

Tanya did as instructed and a flood of light welled up in the laboratory to reveal a hideous sight: a great dead hulk on the floor, bathed in his own blood. Every vestige of color left Tanya's face as her hands came to her breast. "You—you killed *that*? With your bare hands you killed *that*—*thing*?"

Jason smiled weakly as he examined himself for dangerous wounds and broken bones. "It's an astrodite—a particular vicious species. After feeling it in the dark I gambled on it being that."

"But how did that help you?"

"They have extremely vulnerable throats. I guess nature forgot to cover their jugular veins—or perhaps left their jugulars exposed on purpose in order to give an adversary some faint chance of killing them."

Tanya's eyes turned anx-

iously to Jason. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Its fangs failed to reach me."

"How do you suppose it got here?"

Jason replied with a rather shamefaced look. "I was a fool. You told me last night that certain information had gotten out, that my treacherous assistant talked before he died of his wounds. And in my self-confidence—my conceit—I didn't believe you and thus almost lost my life."

"It was Karkis the Venusian of course, who left that monster here to slay you," the girl said.

"Yes. Karkis evidently entered this cell—" Jason's eyes widened suddenly. He had been so deeply occupied that he had not had time to think of it before, but now he plunged across the room and clawed at a steel safe against the far wall. He flung it open.

It was empty.

He turned like a desperate animal, his eyes wild. "The torch!" he cried. "The torch is gone!"

Tanya came forward, her concern obviously for Jason rather than the torch. "Jason—darling! Please! You must take it calmly. You mustn't let it—"

"Take it calmly?" he cried.

"The work of years stolen by another? Snatched from under my nose? My life's work ripped from me and I must take it calmly?"

Tanya reached out and put her arms around him. She drew him close, feeling rage and despair vibrate through his body. "Quiet—quiet," she whispered.

And in a few moments the uncontrollable rage seeped away, the bitter disappointment faded, giving ground to the old courage, to the iron will and never-say-die spirit that was an inherent part of Jason Welch, as much a part of him as his bone and muscle.

He straightened and smiled. He disengaged himself gently from her arms and held her away. "Thanks. Thanks a lot. You're what a man needs to get over the rough spots."

"Am I?" She seemed happy with the praise.

"And now there are things to do."

"What things?"

"Go after Karkis, of course. He hasn't won. Our ship is far faster than his. I'll follow him beyond Time and Space, if necessary, to get back what is mine."

"And I'll go with you," she whispered softly. "Beyond Time and Space . . ."

Jason paced the pilot room of his Star Rover. He glanced at his watch. "Why don't they get here? What's keeping them? Every instant Karkis moves further away and my crew sits swilling liquor in the taverns."

"Patience, Jason," Tanya said. "They still have time. You told them we blasted at fourteen. They will come."

Jason was aware of this but the minutes dragged agonizingly. He turned again to the course he had laid and went over it for flaws. There was none. He had based the course on the near-certainty that Karkis would head straight for Planet Zero.

He turned from the chart table and strode down the companionway to the port. A big Martian hillman looked up from his post by the ramp and saluted. Jason had put him in charge of checking in the crew. "How goes it?" Jason asked impatiently.

"Five to come, sir. They have twelve minutes."

"The rest aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll serve as first mate."

"Thank you, sir." There was extra money in the job and all spacemen coveted the berth.

As the Martian was thanking Jason, two Terrans hove

in sight and approached the ramp. Jason recognized one of them as having signed on at the hiring hall. The other was a stranger. They were both obvious cutthroats from some stinking slum of Terra, dirty, ragged, bearded and sullen.

The one Jason recognized gave a slovenly salute and said, "Zirkoff reporting, sir."

The Martian checked him in, whereupon he shuffled his feet and glanced at his companion. "You have something to say, man?" Jason asked.

"By your leave, sir."

"Out with it."

"Yesterday you hired a Venusian—same time as you hired me."

"I remember."

"Well, sir—we went out of the hall together—with our binding money, sir, and decided to have a couple of drinks, sir, just to wash away the dust, you understand—"

"Get to the point!"

"Well, sir. We was in this tavern minding our own business, sir, and some trouble started. Well, sir—the Venusian, he got kind of hurt, sir. Kind of killed, you might say."

"In short, the Venusian got killed and so we're one man short."

"Yes, sir," the Terran said eagerly. "But not quite short handed, sir. Afterwards, I met

my friend here—Mike Zinkman—and he'd like to sign aboard, sir, in the Venusian's place."

"In other words," Jason barked, "you and your friend killed the Venusian so there would be a berth for Zinkman."

"Oh, no, sir!" the Terran protested. "We ain't that kind, sir. And the Venusian's murd—his death was just an unfortunate accident, as you might say."

Jason stared at his two racial brothers with marked revulsion and disgust. He would have been delighted to send them both packing but he could not rise with a short crew and there was no time to go to the hiring hall.

Jason motioned to the Martian hillman. "Sign him on."

The Martian frowned. "But, sir—"

"I said—sign him on."

The Martian shrugged. The two Terrans shuffled their feet, glanced at each other covertly and grinned.

Jason turned and went back into the ship. Inside the port, he called back, "Mate, report to me the instant the crew is accounted for and at their posts."

"Yes, sir."

Ten minutes later, the first

mate presented himself in the pilot room and saluted. "All ready and waiting, sir."

"Good. Take your post. Stand by for orders." The Martian hesitated and Jason asked, "Well—?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, I don't like that new crew member—the one you just had me sign on."

"Is he a previous acquaintance?"

"No, sir."

"Then what's wrong with him?"

"Nothing I can lay my hand on. Just my instinct—"

Jason was well acquainted with the sharp preceptive abilities of the Martian hillmen. While not particularly highly civilized, they could sense the future, foretell danger. As witness, it was impossible to ambush one of them and most of them were able to foretell their one demise.

As Jason hesitated, the Martian said, "You mentioned, yourself, that they killed to get Zinkman the berth."

"True, and they probably did, but that's not my responsibility. There is no law against murder on this planet."

"But why did he want the berth so bad? This is a black cruise. Most men don't seek such."

"Who knows?" Jason said impatiently. "At any rate, it's too late to do anything about it now. Just watch the man. And report anything definite to me."

"Yes, sir."

Jason's face was grim. "When we're in space this won't be Mars any longer. And there *will* be a law against murder."

"Yes, sir."

Seven minutes later, the Star Rover blasted, arcing up into the sky through the thin Martian atmosphere, leaving an orange and crimson trail in its wake.

Jason set his speed at the last possible notch against the time warp—set it too close for absolute safety as he gambled with his own life and the lives aboard to get the last possible thousand miles per second from the craft.

The first mate entered the cabin and turned pale at sight of the gauge. Jason noted this and challenged with a scowl, well knowing the image in the Martian's mind. The image of a coffin ship rocketing through Time after the warp had been passed, a load of rattling skeletons aboard.

"All secure, sir," the Martian said.

"Very well. Stand by for

orders. Forced watches begin immediately."

"Very well, sir." The Martian left the cabin, his mood morose. This was not just a black voyage. It was a devil's cruise with a devil at the helm and a devil's crew manning the ship.

Tanya had gone to her cabin and Jason paced back and forth before the controls like a caged tiger. Before his eyes loomed an arrogant, evil face. A voice drummed in his ears hour after hour: "I've beaten you, Jason Welch. I've stolen the product of your brain and I will reap the reward that would have been yours. Therefore, my brain is keener than yours — stronger — and only the stronger deserve fine rewards. When I see you sometime in the gutter, I'll toss you a coin. Never let it be said that Karkis the Venusian is not a generous man." Then laughter—ghost laughter—in Jason's ears.

Eight long and agonizing hours passed before a small dot appeared on the scope. A savage thrill arose in Jason Welch's breast as he saw it. Soon the waiting would be over.

He turned away from the scope, his mind occupied by a sudden sobering thought. He

pondered for a few brief moments, then swiftly left the cabin and moved down the companionway.

To Tanya's door. He approached it on tiptoe, listened with his ear to the panel. Satisfied, he took a magnetic key from his pocket and manipulated the lock. He smiled. Now no one could enter or leave the cabin until he permitted it. Thus would Tanya be comparatively safe during the action ahead. Then Jason returned to the pilot cabin and signalled for the first mate.

When the Martian arrived and saluted, Jason pointed to the scope. "Do you see that ship?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take the glasses and look at it through the port."

The Martian did as he was bidden. "A Spaatz Five," he said. "Heavily armed. A floating fortress."

"We're going to take her."

Surprise broke through the Martian's veneer of discipline and he turned on Jason in consternation. "Take her? You're mad, sir!"

Jason smiled grimly. "Am I?"

"With all due respect, sir, I still must say it's impossible."

"Is it?"

"It would be like a child attempting to defeat an experi-

enced warrior in open combat."

"Tell me more."

"Every life on this ship would automatically be forfeit. They would slay us in our pitiful helplessness before we could get close enough to use our own guns."

"But I have a plan, Martian."

The other shrugged. "No plan could possibly bring success except one."

"And what is that?"

"Unless you have some means of striking all aboard her with a plague, killing them instantly. Then all we would have to do is board her in flight—an impossibility of course, but so long as we are talking of impossibilities it really doesn't matter."

Jason laughed again, his laughter ringing with the gaiety that always enveloped him when danger was just beyond the threshold. "No, I have no power to produce a plague, but still I have a plan. You say it is impossible to board the ship. Have you forgotten the jet tube alleys? They are left open on any blasting ship until the primary deposits of the blast-off are cleared. A matter of two hours after blast-off."

"True, but that was hours

ago and the alley ports of the Spaatz are now closed. Beside, even if they were open we could not get close enough to avail ourselves of such an entrance."

"Then we will attack the Spaatz before they were closed."

The Martian's eyes widened. "You mean go back in Time, sir?"

"Exactly. Here—" Jason took the Martian by the arm and hauled him to the plotting table. "I have not been idle these past hours. I've plotted the Spaatz' course right from the Metropolis blast pits. I've recorded the exact seconds of its locations in its orbit during the period when the alley ports were open."

The Martian was almost beyond words in his utter amazement. "You propose to go back and—"

"I propose to appear out of Time directly off the Spaatz' alley ports. I propose to board her and keep her fighters occupied until you grapple on. Somehow, I will open one of her ports. Then it will be an even fight—man to man—crew to crew!" Jason slapped the first mate on the shoulder, trying to instill a bit of his own enthusiasm. "We'll take her—take her in combat, Mar-

tian. What think you of my plan?"

"I'd say it will fail because of the split-second timing necessary, but the crew would love a fight like that."

"But it does not make you happy?"

The Martian shook his head sadly. "That does not matter. I saw my own death since we blasted off. I see it coming within the next natural hour. But you will find I will do my duty."

Jason's expression softened, but he knew better than to question or try to change the Martian's destiny. He knew these people always saw true in such cases. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

A moment of strange indecision struck him. It was a feeling he had never had before, a sense of compassion that had been alien to the hard world in which he had lived and striven. "I will abandon the plan if you say so. I would not want to cause your death." And even as he spoke it was as though he were someone else; as though he heard another say the words. Abandon his course after all the bitter years? Absurd! But he had said the words and he knew he would stick by them at a nod from the other.

But the Martian shook his head. "It makes no difference. Your destiny does not impinge upon mine. Whatever course you take, my fate will be the same. But thank you for your good feeling toward me. Good feeling is far too rare in this mad universe."

"Then we go forward. Prepare the men. Acquaint them with the plan and tell them what is expected of them. Those who win through will gain such wealth as no crew ever saw. Tell them that."

"I will, sir."

"Now these are my orders . . ." And Jason outlined the placing of the men and set up the various details which were to be executed while he fought alone for his life inside the mighty Spaatz Five.

The Martian saluted and turned to go. But at the door he turned back. "Yes?" Jason questioned.

"I was just thinking, sir. Although you cannot foresee your destiny, it could be the same as mine."

"The odds favor such a possibility."

"Then perhaps we will meet on the other side."

Jason smiled. "And discover whether Terrans and Martians go to the same heaven."

"Or to separate hells."

"I can hardly wait to find out," Jason said wryly, and the Martian went about his duties. Alone, Jason stared down at the greatening spot on the scope. "Karkis," he whispered, "within the hour one of us will come to the end of life. Our paths will never cross again."

Jason crouched by the small escape port near the stern of the Star Rover. He carried a ray gun on his hip and clutched a short, wicked Venusian dagger in his teeth! Up in the control cabin the automatic mechanism was moving coldly and impersonally through the maneuverings he had patterned for its almost human executive center.

Jason stood alert, waiting for the first faint sensing of the physical languor that would accompany the ship's reverse movement into the time warp. When he felt it, he reached forward and jerked loose the bucklings that held the port hatch secure. He achieved this just in time because, as his hands fell away from the last steel buckle he knew that all the will power in the world could not have forced it up again. His arms and body became incredibly heavy. A delicious languor enveloped his body and he knew

that every soul on the ship was experiencing the same sensation. Nothing was important anymore. Seizing the wealth behind the steel wall Welker had built to defy the ages seemed a childish and purposeless task. Who wanted wealth? Who needed anything in this warm delirious world? Thus was the physical and mental effort of moving backward in Time.

The joy seemed to last forever but in reality it was over in a matter of seconds in natural time. Then the true flow of the fourth dimension reasserted itself and Jason came like a sleeping tiger out of his dream.

For an instant he stiffened himself. The moment had come. He must hurl himself into space. If he had calculated correctly there would be a jet alley port waiting to receive him. If he had miscalculated by so much as a ten-millionth of one percent—there would be nothing but empty void.

Grimly he threw open the port and leaped. The leap was necessary—a completely blind one—because of both the time and distance elements. He had scant seconds to reach his goal because cosmic drift would alter the positions of the ships in that time. He leaped.

And found nothing.

Hanging in space, feeling the awful vacancy of eternal vacuum, he consigned his soul to whatever gods would receive it and opened his eyes. He saw empty void and instinctively turned, writhing like a helpless bug on an invisible string seeking to regain a handhold on the steel edge of the emergency port.

This he knew in advance was impossible, but in the turning and the writhing a sudden blast of air hit his face and his spirits soared upward. That blast could come from only one place—the jet alley through which air from the Spaatz' atmosphere unit was being blasted in order to hold back the vacuum of space.

Wildly Jason clutched out, knowing that the shock of the jump had momentarily blinded him and made his eyes useless. His fingers caught an edge of blessed steel and his pounding heart sang: *I've made it—made it—made it—*

As indeed he had. The air blasting against him and seeking to tear away his fingers meant nothing. The danger ahead meant nothing. He had made it and again he had a voice in his own destiny.

He pulled himself painfully into the jet alley, the force of

the air blast screeching around his ears, the holocaust in the vicious wind tunnel tearing even at his reason.

Doggedly he drove forward until his hand found the outline of a small door beside the screaming air duct. The door would, of course, be locked on the inside, but this he had expected. Like a man straining against the weight of tons, he moved his hand toward his holster. He got his fingers around the butt of the gun. He put every sinew of his mind to the concentration necessary to hold the gun—to keep the air blast from tearing it away and hurtling it into space.

Slowly he brought it forward, pointed its muzzle at the spot where the inside buckle was held by a set of rivets secured clear through the panel. He pressed the ray switch.

There was the sudden sound of shrieking, tortured metal as the ray began its deadly work. The bolts and the steel plate were rent and torn like so much paper. Jason put his shoulder against the panel and shoved. The hatch swung open and he leaped forward into the bowels of the mighty Spaatz Five, one lone man against the most vicious crew that could be assembled in any universe, against the most un-

assailable fortress-mechanism the genius of Man had ever put together. But his heart sang a fierce song, the song of the dedicated fighting man to whom odds are as nothing.

He was in a shining companionway and as he gained his footing, the huge form of a Venusian crewman hove into sight. The man's impetus brought him within three steps of Jason before his mind could react and bring his hideous body to a halt.

Jason raised the gun, then hesitated. The sound of the blast would bring a dozen enemies seeking the source of it. He jammed the gun toward its holster but missed the pocket and heard the weapon clatter to the floor as he brought out the short ugly sword. There was no time to regain the gun. There was only time to jam the sword into the vitals of the Venusian.

Blood gushed over the hilt and drenched Jason's right arm. And even in his dying, the crewman defeated Jason's plan of silent slaughter by emitting a shriek of agony that must have sent a chill into every square inch of the mighty ship.

Jason realized he might just as well have used the gun but it was too late for regrets. It was even too late to retrieve

the weapon because instantly three more crewmen tumbled into the companionway.

Now did Jason know that the die was cast. He knew there was no time for anything but the fight. He again had the advantage of surprise and he used it well. Without hesitation he leaped forward and sliced the life from two of the crewmen before their brains were able to translate the mad, bloody picture their eyes carried.

The third crewman was more alert. He took a quick step backward and drew a short-blade from his hip. He parried Jason's first thrust and reached out with his naked hand. This proved a fatal mistake. Jason slashed at it viciously, ripping his own blade down its length. The crewman squalled in pain and rage and lowered his right arm. This left him unguarded and a fighter of Jason's caliber needed no second chance. One thrust and the crewman collapsed in the agony that ends only in death.

Jason carried in his mind a picture of the port he had to reach and open. It lay roughly two hundred steps forward. He raced toward it, hope suddenly blooming that he would make it with the first surprise rush.

But not so. He had gone scarcely fifty steps when the doors flanking the companionway began erupting the hideous beings of a dozen planets and asteroids from which Karkis the Venusian had recruited his terrible crew.

Jason sent one—two—three of the semi-human beasts to a quick death but their number increased even as he labored at diminishing it.

Blocked by a wall of hideous flesh as the companionway filled up, Jason suddenly crouched and whirled. "All right, men! Spray the companionway with fire!" He spoke as to a large attacking party in his wake; spoke with high confidence as though the number were large.

Those who blocked his way were impressed by his ruse—so deeply impressed that they fell headlong in all directions, wanting no part of a ray-bath from attackers who might appear behind Jason at any moment.

Alert for the retreat, Jason ran through the companionway. He hoped only to get past the men and to the port outside where his own force would be waiting. If those in the rear recovered and charged him too soon, he was finished. But this was a risk he could not fend off; he gave

it no further thought, placing all his attention on whatever peril lay ahead.

Only four men blocked him as he approached the port. In a frenzy of savage attack, he threw himself upon them knowing that time was his main ally. He had to work fast or all this would be useless.

Surprise, he learned, was also a factor in his favor and he was able to slay two of the men before they could recover their wits.

The third was not so slow and slashed Jason viciously with a drawn utility knife. Jason scarcely felt the blade sear his chest as he plunged his own weapon into the fellow's vitals.

He turned instantly upon the fourth man but the latter backed away. He was a nondescript Terran with an evil face and a weak mouth. Words of supplication spewed from that mouth: "I'll turn your way! I'll turn your way! Mercy!"

Jason stayed his blade. This was not entirely unexpected. Every black crew had its quota of traitors and turncoats. Jason knew that one or more of his own men would turn upon him also if things were reversed.

"All right!" Jason snapped. "Open that port!"

"Open the port?" The turncoat visualized the ship's air supply vanishing into space, resulting in death for all.

"My men have grappled on! Open the port!"

The traitor sprang to his work and with Jason's help soon had the port swinging open. Instantly a savage, well-armed hoard from the Star Rover poured into the vitals of the big Spaatz.

Jason smiled at the Martian mate who had done his work so well. He slapped the man on the shoulder and gave only one order. "Take the ship!"

Then he turned on his newfound ally. "You—take me to Karkis the Venusian. We will settle all scores now!"

The traitor responded eagerly glad to quit the fighting area. "This way," he called, and ran up the companionway.

Jason followed at his heels, coming to an abrupt halt when the other Terran stopped before a closed door. "This is the Venusian's cabin," he said.

"Is Karkis inside?"

"So far as I know."

Jason tried the knob but the door was locked. He placed his ear to the steel panel. A light of satisfaction dawned in his eyes and he shouted. "This is the end, Karkis! Come out and

face me. You shall have your chance with whatever weapons you choose. Jason Welch doesn't cut down his enemies unarmed. Open the door and face me!"

But Karkis—if he was inside—declined the invitation. Jason again put his ear to the door. He frowned. "Something is going on in there. I don't like the sound of it. I've got to get through this panel."

"Have you no ray gun?"

"No."

The traitor marveled at this man who would attack a ship single-handed with but a short sword as a weapon. But he had little time to contemplate this brand of foolhardiness. Jason seized him by the arm. "Where can I find a ray gun? Where is your arsenal?"

"This way," the man said and led Jason a short distance further on and pointed to a series of shuttered steel racks bolted to the wall of the companionway.

The shutters were locked but one hasp yielded to a twist of Jason's blade and he threw open the cabinet. He snatched the first ray gun his fingers touched and returned as he had come. In an instant he had burned away the lock on Karkis' door.

As Jason sprang into the room, his face paled at the

sight that met his eyes. A port in the outer wall of the cabin was open. It fed into a grappling shield that hooked it to another port, one giving through the outer shell of the Star Rover.

Instantly Jason realized the true situation. There had been treachery on both sides. And an almost incredible foresight on the part of Karkis the Venusian. At the first sign of attack, the Venusian counterplan had been activated. Someone in the Star Rover had opened the port to allow Karkis access through this second entrance.

Sick at heart, Jason rushed back into the Star Rover, not knowing what he would find, ready for anything. At first he found no adversary. Only a deserted ship, a ship whose entire crew was fighting for its life in the bowels of the Spaatz to which the Star Rover was now doubly attached.

Jason plunged on, back toward the escape hatches rearward and there he was forcefully apprised of Karkis' skill at counter-dealing.

One of the escape hatches had been opened and grappled to a small scout ship and as Jason rocketed on the scene, Karkis was just making his

escape from the larger ship into the scout.

Beyond the big Venusian, Jason could see Tanya being dragged forcibly along by the renegade Terran—the man whom the Venusian mate had suspected, the man who had been signed on at Jason's order.

Jason cursed himself for his stupidity in not heeding the Venusian's telepathic sense. But now it was too late for regrets. It was a time for desperate action.

Jason flung himself on Karkis but the man fended him off with a weapon. This coupled with the Venusian's bulk, brought Jason to a momentary standstill. In blind desperation, he clawed at the weapon and got his hands on it. He strove to wrest it from Karkis' grasp.

The latter could probably have shaken Jason off but over the latter's shoulder, he saw his own traitorous crewman advancing with a knife and the treacherous Terran's eyes left no doubt as to which side he was now on. The knife was obviously for Karkis' own heart.

Having no stomach for such a death, the Venusian released his hold on the weapon and sprang backward into the scout ship. Swiftly he slam-

med the port, shutting the scout off from the mother ship.

Jason hurled himself forward but was met with cold sheet-steel. Instinctively he threw himself backward into the Star Rover as a rending sound told him the Venusian had opened the jets of the scout, driving it forward and tearing the grappling chamber away from the Star Rover by sheer force.

Jason's next act was also instinctive. He slammed shut the port of the Star Rover to hold back the vacuum of open space because protection of a ship was always the first concern of the men who followed the star routes. The first commandment of space.

The sounds of battle came but faintly through the ports on the far side of the ship and Jason stood with sinking heart and dark thoughts as he realized the terrible direction into which his fight had moved. Karkis had escaped. Tanya was his prisoner. And—

Dully, Jason looked down at the weapon in his hands but so great was his inner agony that for several moments he was unable to identify it. Then his head cleared and with it the red fog before his eyes faded.

He saw that he held in his hands the seventh drill—the one he had perfected to cut through the steel of Welker's wall. This was what he had wrested from Karkis as the latter fled into the scout ship.

But there was little thrill in the knowledge for Jason. He should have been fiercely happy at having recovered his drill but he now realized that in so doing, he had lost something far more precious. What would be the beautiful Tanya's fate at the hands of the Venusian beast, Karkis?

Jason shuddered inwardly as he turned and went out to see how the battle progressed. And it was in his mind that he did not care much one way or the other.

Still, he was ready to fight savagely to the death beside his men even though it be from sheer force of habit alone. This was not necessary however. The men of the Star Rover had already scored their victory. Jason looked dully upon the high-piled bodies of the dead. He saw with sorrow the body of the Venusian he had appointed as first mate. The man had foreseen his own death and it had come to pass.

Listlessly, Jason checked the crew and discovered he had enough men left to move the ship so long as no one

stopped to rest. But sleep would no longer be necessary now, for Planet Zero was not far away.

Jason assigned a new mate, a Terran with a face slightly less evil-looking than the rest, and moved like a man in a deep mental depression toward his control cabin.

Halfway there, something snapped in his brain. He came completely out of the daze into which Tanya's capture had plunged him. Like a man recovering from a blow on the skull, he shook his head sharply. Then he ran into the cabin and signalled for the mate.

When the man arrived, Jason said, "A scout ship took off from our stern ten minutes ago. Every man at his station! No one sleeps, no one eats, until we've overtaken that scout."

The mate hardly comprehended. "But our course was for Planet Zero—"

"Our course has been changed. I'm depending on you to keep the men in line. The hours ahead may be grueling ones but we must head off that scout before it reaches Planet Zero."

"Yes, sir."

The mate saluted and left and Jason sat tense at the controls until the lights signalled full power ready and

awaiting his command. He glued his eyes to the scope, set himself at the controls, and went to work.

The area surrounding Planet Zero was as vast as that around any planet and the Star Rover was but a mite in this-huge sea of void. Jason could move only in an ever-increasing orbit, changing his progress-angle periodically as he stared hour after hour at the scope.

At times his eyes blurred from the strain and he dashed water into them savagely and went back to his scanning, fearful that during those brief moments the scout could have appeared on the scope and again vanished.

Then, when he was ready to fall forward into sleep from sheer exhaustion, a small speck appeared on the screen. Jason blinked fiercely. Had he really seen it? Or were his tortured eyes playing some kind of trick?

The speck remained, grew larger, and Jason's heart swelled. There was no doubt in his mind but what it was the scout, as no other ships would have any reason to be roaming these skies.

He forced from his mind the awful question as to whether or not he was too late

and signalled the Terran he had put in second command.

When the latter responded over the intercom, Jason barked, "Objective sighted. I'm moving in. Stand by for orders. I'll contact the scout by radio."

The mate acknowledged and Jason moved down on the comparatively slower scout ship like an avalanche upon a motionless rock. His swift maneuvering took away the breath of the watching crewman and in no time he hove across the bow of the scout and yelled, "Hold!" into the radio transmitter.

There was no reply. Jason snapped, "Acknowledge or I'll blow you to bits."

The voice of Karkis, the Venusian came back. There was amusement and mockery in it. "I don't think you'll do that, Jason Welch. There's the matter of your beautiful partner."

Jason's heart skipped a beat. "Then she's all right. You haven't harmed her?"

"Give me more credit than that. Why do you think I took her with me?"

"Because you need a woman to hide behind."

Karkis refused to become incensed. "Be that as it may, I'm clever because I am able to turn apparent defeat into

victory every time. I didn't think you'd be able to locate me before I reached Planet Zero but I took the girl as a precaution. Now, even though you've found me, I still have you helpless."

Jason writhed inwardly. It was true. But he could not reveal his true feelings on the subject. "In a sense, yes. But I command your personal destiny. You'll answer for any harm you do to Tanya."

"It seems then that we've reached an impasse. Therefore a compromise is in order."

"What compromise?"

"One you won't refuse, being afflicted with the soft heart of the Terran. I will return you the girl unharmed. In exchange, you are to make no move against me with your superior force."

Jason's mind raced. What was Karkis up to? He could have driven a harder bargain. But then again, did he know this? He could have got back the drill, but in the savage coldness of his temperament he was no doubt afraid to push Jason that far. While he realized Jason would make a sacrifice for Tanya, his icy alien imagination could not tell him just how much of a sacrifice.

Although it was torture, Jason remained silent, hoping Karkis would think he was

balancing value given against value received. Then he spoke gruffly, "All right. I agree."

The tone of his voice indicated the decision was hard and that was as far as he could be pushed. Karkis believed this, much to Jason's relief. Karkis said, "I'll put the girl overboard in a suit. You can pick her up. But wait until I'm clear because I don't want any tricks."

"All right. Get on with it."

From that moment to the time he was stripping off Tanya's space suit seemed an age to Jason. He devoured her with his eyes and laid his hands on her hungrily. But he kept the hunger out of his voice as he asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Karkis wanted me first as a bargaining property. If you hadn't found us—" She lowered her eyes and flushed, leaving the rest unsaid.

Jason looked out the port. "There he goes."

"And you aren't going to pursue him?"

"No. I made a bargain. When I make a bargain, even with a fiend, I keep it."

"I was hoping you would say that," Tanya told him softly.

He ignored the tone and said, "We'll go on to Planet

Zero and the Steel Box. Kar-kis is finished."

Tanya frowned. "I'm not so sure of that."

"But we've taken his ship—smashed his crew."

"He has a base on Planet Zero. I heard him say that to the Terran who helped him."

"It can't be much of a base."

"Perhaps, but his manner did not reflect any weakness in it. He seemed supremely confident when he released me."

"I think you judged bravado for confidence. He was probably trying to save face by laughing in the teeth of defeat. We'll go ahead with our plans."

"But be careful," Tanya implored. "Be very careful."

"Of course," Jason replied absently as he returned to the controls. "You'd better go and get some rest."

He crossed the cabin and set the controls for Planet Zero . . .

Welker's Steel Box sat square and ugly on a bleak wind-swept desert. It had sat thus for over a hundred years; since the day Welker entered it and walled himself in to die.

Jason Welch set the Star Rover down half a mile from the box and started out across

the rocky terrain toward his goal. No one challenged him. No one sought to bar his way. The natives of the planet gave this place a wide berth. Once members of a proud and prosperous race, they had retrogressed swiftly after the great Welker deserted them. Robbed of their scientific magic, all of which he had taken into the Steel Box with him, they now lived in small villages or in the dead cities Welker left behind.

Jason Welch approached the Steel Box with the drill in his hands. He knew that a great surge of triumph should have walked with him but instead, his spirits were low and he knew not why.

He turned his eyes and his full attention on the Steel Box. It consisted of a cube, its dimension about twenty feet in all directions. As he came close, Jason saw the familiar marks on its impregnable walls, scars put there through the years by those who had tried to enter. Some of the marks he had put there himself in earlier fruitless efforts. A tunnel had been dug beneath the box by some enterprising adventurer who had sought entrance from underneath. Entrance had not been gained.

Jason stood by the wall for

a long time staring at the tool he had perfected. Would it work? Strangely, there was no great anxiety in his mind as he asked himself this question. He only knew that this would be his last attempt. If this drill failed, Welker's secrets would be safe forever so far as Jason Welch was concerned.

He took a deep breath, set the drill, and pressed the switch. A beam of invisible sonic force whined as it left the barrel. The beam hit the wall and Jason was hurled backward as though hit on the shoulder by a battering ram. He got ruefully to his feet and returned to the task, angling the drill this time so that the reaction would not be hurled directly back at him.

The drill whined and shivered. The wall held. Failure. Then, in one small spot, the strange and mighty metal of Welker began to vibrate and a thrill ran through Jason. He had found the answer. Welker's wall was coming down!

All his attention was now riveted on the point of the wall against which the sonic beam flailed its dreadful power, cutting through the steel, vindicating Jason as a scientist. This, though he knew it not, was the source of his thrill.

Longer and longer grew the circular cut as the sonic power bit into the metal. Deeper and deeper grew Jason's preoccupation with the task. So deep that the mobile tank was almost upon him when it caught his attention.

He whirled and took stock and instantly he realized the situation. Again he had been negligent. Again he had underestimated Karkis. Obviously the Venusian had set up a strong base on the opposite side of the Steel Box. Now he was moving in and Jason was helpless.

He cursed himself for not heeding Tanya's warning, for not bringing the ship in closer so that he could have worked under the defense of its guns. Now all was lost.

But Jason did not give up. Perhaps, within the Steel Box lay help although this possibility was remote. Perhaps Welker had left a weapon handy and waiting, but this was probably mere wishful thinking. At any rate, Jason's hope lay in opening the box and entering before the mobile tank began spewing its deadly fire.

Karkis was holding off, no doubt in the contemptuous certainty that Jason was helpless. Desperately, Jason set

the drill to its notch of highest power. The metal of Welker's box whined and disintegrated. But Jason knew he could not achieve his objective in time. Karkis could fire his guns at any moment and annihilate him.

Then a section of Welker's wall fell inward with a sharp sound. Tensing himself for Karkis' fire, Jason whirled to take it in front.

And a strange thing happened.

Karkis' lethal tank stood suddenly up on end. It quivered, went over backwards and began bouncing around the arid desert floor like a celluloid ball harassed by a stream of water from a hose.

Jason's amazement was no less than that which was obviously Karkis' inside the tank. Jason stared in wonder, then saw the cockpit of the tank open. Karkis and another man tumbled out in panic. The second man had hardly touched the ground when he ricocheted across the desert to bounce again and again and come finally to rest, a dead thing of mangled flesh and broken bones.

Then Jason knew! Thinking himself unarmed, he had had a deadly weapon all the time. The drill! Turned into open desert, its sonic ray had

fanned out to annihilate everything within range. The tank was a broken battered chunk of metal and Karkis was groveling on the ground screaming, "Mercy! Mercy! I fear death! Have mercy! I beg of you!"

But even as Jason's finger moved toward the switch to shut off the power of the drill, a wisp of its invisible power caught Karkis up and hurled him against the smashed tank. There was the sound of breaking bones just after Karkis screamed for the last time. Then he was dead.

Jason lowered the gun. He felt numb, spent, weary. He turned slowly and looked through the hole he had cut —looked into Welker's Steel Box.

He had won . . .

"Jason?"

Jason Welch looked up from his deep preoccupation to see Tanya standing outside the jagged opening looking into the now-opened chamber. "Come in," Jason said.

As Tanya entered, Jason waved a hand. "It's all here. Welker's books, his knowledge, all his incredible science." He was so deeply engrossed in the scene that he did not see the ray gun in Tanya's hand, did not notice

the pale, tortured look upon her face.

"The idrium is here, in a neat package," he went on. "But all this other material. I wonder why he was so careful to gather it and catalogue it so exhaustively?"

As though by mutual consent, they both avoided looking at the wispy skeleton that lay on a cot in one corner of the steel chamber. Tanya held her eyes dead on Jason. "I can tell you why," she said.

Jason looked up in surprise.

"Then please do."

"I never told you why I wanted to come here—had to come here with you—or who I really am. In truth, I am a descendant of Welker. He was my great-great-grandfather and before he entered the Box, he left a letter with his son, stating his reasons for this act. He was a humanitarian, was Welker, and built only for peace and prosperity. But the people he built for, those of Planet Zero, grew proud and arrogant. Through the science he gave them, they decided to conquer this solar system. That was why they moved their planet into it.

"When Welker saw their plans, he punished them by taking his science away from them, by taking the idrium which would make their wars

possible and putting it beyond their reach.

"All this work he did in here was foretold in the letter he left to his descendants. He said that someday the chamber would be entered and that when this happened, his science and the materials whereby the planet could again prosper must be given back to the people. That they would have learned their lesson and would be again worthy."

Jason's eyes stayed on Tanya's taut face, never moving, never blinking. "That," she said, "was the task he set for us, the task to which we have been dedicated. To be here when the chamber was opened and to see that the people got back their just and rightful heritage, that no greedy adventurer deprived them of it."

In an incredibly short time, many things happened in Jason Welch's mind. He saw a woman torn savagely between love and dedicated duty. He saw the ray gun and knew why she had brought it with her. He saw the agony of dissension and turmoil that went on within her soul.

Which force would win? Jason knew Tanya loved him as he loved her but he also knew the power of a dedicated purpose. Would she use the

gun? Could she bring herself to shoot him down in order to protect that which had been given to her to protect? Jason did not want to find out. He did not want the woman he loved put to that test.

He said, "Tanya, I've learned a strange thing."

"What have you learned, my darl— What have you learned, Jason?"

"A peculiar thing about ambitions and objectives. For years I have wanted only to get into this chamber and get my hands on that idrium. I have lived that objective, slept it, dreamed it. But now I find an emptiness within me, an emptiness I could not understand. But now I do.

"I learned that the idrium was really a mirage at the end of my personal rainbow. The symbol of the thing I really craved: the doing, the struggle, the victory. I learned that when a man reaches his objective, that objective becomes unimportant, that the *achieving* was the thing he wanted all the time—not the objective. The objective is only the lure—the temptation that gives meaning to the struggle."

Silence screamed in the

little chamber. Then Jason said humbly, "I have the idrium; but in reality I have nothing, because I didn't really want it. I have only an emptiness that was previously filled with doing and achieving."

Tanya flung the gun away and threw herself into his arms. She was crying. "Oh, my darling! My adored one! I could never have killed you! I would have failed! Pity me—and love me!"

A surge of happiness went through Jason Welch. He kissed the woman he loved and then held her away from him and looked into her dear face. He frowned in mock severity.

"Come, come! A descendant of the great Welker shouldn't be weeping. Not when there is so much to do. We have people to see, power to distribute. We've got to get Planet Zero back on its feet."

But the power and the planet had to wait a while because for a long time there was warmth and love and ecstasy in the Steel Box. Then, as the sun descended, Jason Welch and Tanya, his love, came forth and walked hand in hand back to where the Star Rover waited.

THE END

The Man in the Ice Box

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

Frank Boland was the paragon of all husbands. He had to be, with a wife like Alice. You see, she was one of these women who believe anything, no matter how incredible. Like the night Frank came home and was told there was an invisible man in the ice box. Instead of calling up the local happy factory and requesting the latest in Dior straitjackets, he simply opened the refrigerator door and asked the guest to go easy on the milk.

Only this time it worked out a little different. This time—

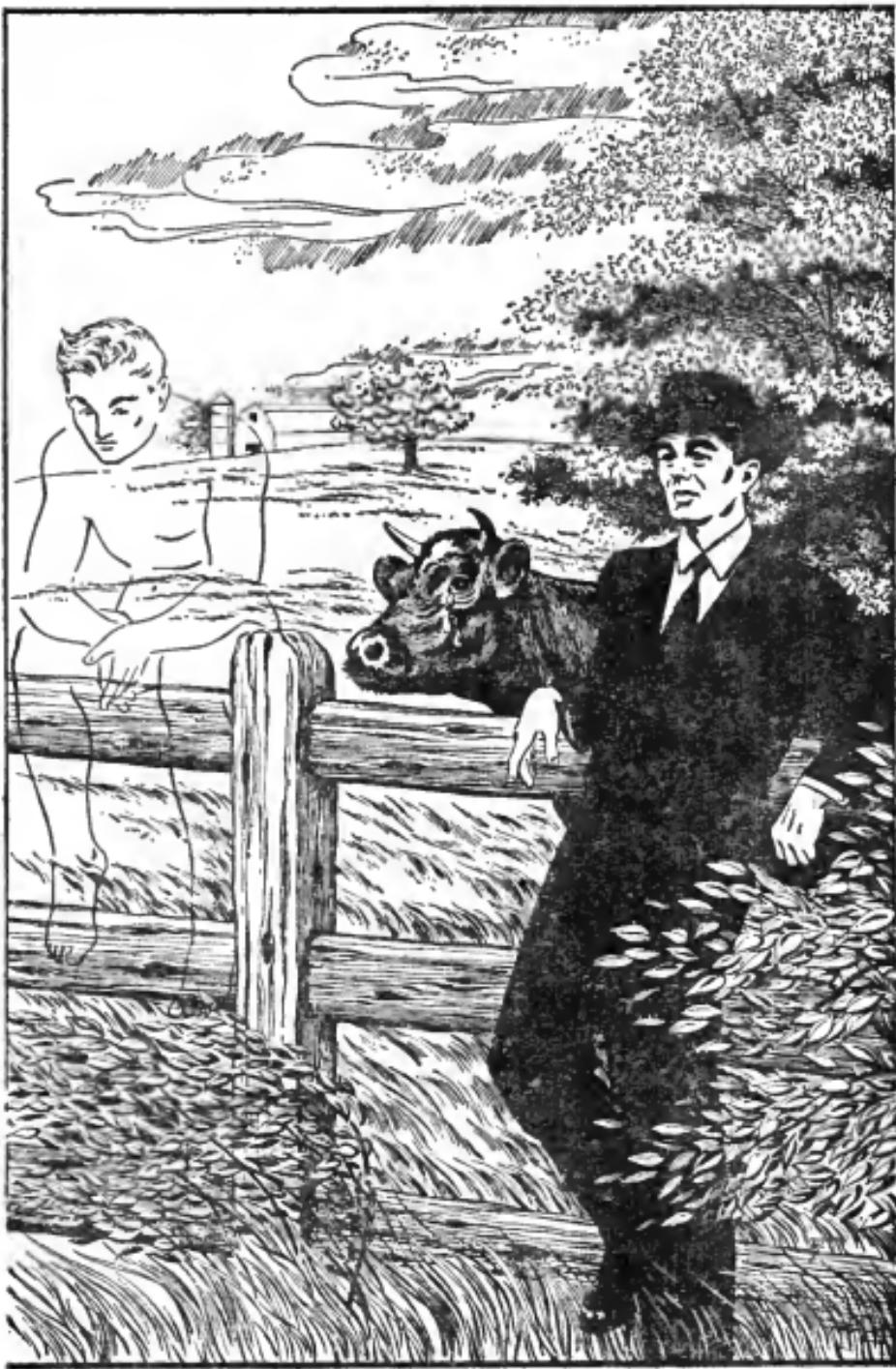
AFTER ten years of very satisfactory married life, the Bolands had worked out a breakfast routine that was admirably suited to their respective temperaments. John Boland would prop his paper against the coffee pot and digest the financial section and as much of the sports page as time would permit.

Alice meanwhile gave him all the neighborhood news—none of which pierced his preoccupation—and thus performed one of the duties of a faithful wife. Keeping a husband posted.

On this particular Wednesday morning, she said, "Dar-

ling, I waited up until eleven last night, but then I dropped off."

Frank Boland said, "Ulv-mess. Werkplidup," a translation of which would read: "Hell of a mess. Work all piled up," implying he'd stayed late to untangle the mess and reduce the size of the pile. Which was entirely true. Frank Boland was not a philanderer. He wanted to make a million dollars and then retire to a home woodworking shop. At the rate he was progressing he would be able to give the one-hundred-and-seventh year of his life to woodworking, but he was not discouraged.



Frank turned away, almost embarrassed. The cow was crying!

Alice said, "Of course, you poor dear. I wanted to tell you about the man. I think we should be honored that he picked us out of everyone else in the neighborhood to stay with." Alice poured some more coffee for Frank. "After coming all the way from Mars, he selected our modest little home out of all the homes in the world!"

"Dmwudovum," (meaning "Damn white of him.") Crosby Oil had gone up three-eighths of a point. Frank wondered if it would be smart to buy a hundred shares for a quick profit.

"No one seems to agree on how he came," Alice said. "Mrs. Doyle swears she saw a little round ship of some sort. She called *The Bulletin* and reported a flying saucer, but they didn't even send a reporter. Can you imagine that?"

"Uh-uh," Frank said, meaning uh-uh, and turned to the sports page. There'd been a tip out on Royal Spender in the fifth at Arlington. He ran his eye down the result column.

"Mrs. Henry said it was just a white flash, but Mrs. Jones swears there were touches of green in it. Anyhow, it was gone in a twinkling."

Frank looked up disgustedly. "Tmmnst?"

Grace looked at the clock. "Eight-fifteen. You'll be late, darling."

"Godago. Seeyatnite." He pecked Alice's cheek and rushed out.

Alice called after him, "But I do think it's nice that he's staying with us, don't you dear?"

A roar from the Chevvy's motor seemed to agree wholeheartedly.

Frank had a hard two weeks at the office and did little during his brief home hours except roll in and out of bed. But then things slackened somewhat—to a point where he was able to go into the basement one evening and inspect his embryo woodworking shop. It was going to be swell when he'd finally straightened things around so he'd have a little time to putter around with wood and tools and patterns. Why, a man could completely furnish his own home with no trouble at all!

He went back upstairs and found Alice cutting recipes out of a magazine. She smiled. "Going to bed, dear?"

"Guess so." He passed the telephone desk, paused suddenly. "What's that pile of papers?"

"Why, the monthly bills, dear. This is the tenth. I always lay them there and you always write the checks."

"Oh, sure—sure. Forgot. Time sure barrels by." He sat down at the desk and began applying his ball point to the checkbook. He applied for five minutes, then turned suddenly with a sheet of paper in his hand. "What in the name of Standard Oil is this?"

Alice looked up, smiling but vague. "What is *what*, dear?"

"This!"

Alice peered. "It looks like the milk bill."

"It is. And it reads twenty-seven dollars!"

Alice pondered for a moment. "Twenty-seven dollars—" she smiled. "That sounds very reasonable, dear."

"But we haven't had a milk bill for more than four dollars since we've been married."

"But that was different. That was before he came."

"He came! Who came?"

"The man, of course."

"What man?"

"The man who's staying with us."

Frank Boland got to his feet and stared at his wife with amazement. "The man who is staying *where*? With *whom*?"

Alice put down her shears in mild exasperation. "Dar-

ling—you have such a short memory. The man who came from Mars and moved in with us."

Frank Boland grasped the corner of the desk and steadied himself. After regaining control, he crossed the room toward his wife. He was calm and unruffled but there was a certain glassiness in his eyes. He laid a gentle hand on Alice's shoulder. "Now let's get this straight, dear. It's probably my fault. I've been neglecting you. But that's all over and everything is going to be all right."

Alice was exceptionally responsive. She took Frank's hand in hers and said, "I'm so glad, darling. You *have* been working too hard."

"Then it was just a joke—your way of calling to my attention—"

"What is a joke, dear?"

"About the man from Mars, living with us."

"Oh, no. He's been here for three weeks."

Frank went quietly back to the desk. He picked up the milk bill very gently and returned to Alice's chair almost on tiptoe. "Now let's go back to the beginning. I commented on the size of the milk bill—"

"And I said it was because the man from Mars doesn't

eat—he only drinks. He drinks only milk."

"You didn't say that, angel," Frank chided with the same studied gentleness.

"I meant to. I really did."

"And now tell me, sweet and beautiful star of my life—where does this man from Mars keep himself? Why haven't I seen him?"

"No one can see him. He's invisible." Alice frowned suddenly. "Frank—I told you all this. I told you several times."

"When did you tell me, sweetheart mine?"

"At breakfast. After all, when else have I seen you lately?"

"Tell me again—please."

"There's nothing much to it. He's invisible—he stays in the refrigerator—he drinks milk."

Frank Boland was going through one of the most trying periods of his life. He realized now that mere business pressure was child's play. He stroked his wife's hair and was filled with regret at his neglect. He said, "Angel pie, if you can't see this man, how do you know he lives in the refrigerator and—and drinks milk?"

To Alice, the proof was obvious. "Look at the size of the milk bill. What more proof do you need?"

Frank laughed. "Of course. How stupid of me. Any court in the land would accept the milk bill as evidence. But isn't there something else? Something that might bolster the milk bill a little." Frank pondered. Mustn't make any mistakes here. Had to be very careful until a doctor could be called in. He said, "Some little thing, darling. Like a fall you might have had, or sudden pains in your head, or strange voices—"

"Strange voices?"

"Yes, pet!" He was getting somewhere now.

"I suppose his voice was strange at first. But it isn't any more. I've grown quite familiar with it. We have a long talk every day."

"And what do you talk about?"

"Oh, Mars, and Earth, and—oh, a lot of things."

"Just the two of you? Never anyone else?"

"No. He's rather shy. He hasn't wanted to meet any other earthlings."

Frank Boland looked into his wife's eyes. They were still young and beautiful. Her face was still unlined. How could he have been so negligent? All those cruel mornings at breakfast. He could have read his damn paper on the train instead of playing bridge with

the boys. "Do you suppose he would talk to me, queen of my waking world?"

"Frank! You say such sweet things. What's gotten into you?"

"I just wondered if your friend would like some three-way talks."

Alice got to her feet. "I'll ask him," she said brightly.

Frank died several deaths while Alice was gone. He castigated himself as fiercely as the time would permit. Then Alice returned and said happily, "He'd be very glad to meet you, Frank. I knew he would."

Frank straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath, hoping he was doing the right thing. After all, he was no psychiatrist. Alice started toward the kitchen. Frank followed a few steps, then said, "You go ahead and tell him I'm coming—sort of pave the way. I'll be right along."

"All right, darling. But you don't have to be in the least self-conscious. He's very democratic."

Alone, Frank dialed Doc Williams. The latter was busy with a patient but came to the phone as soon as he could. Frank said, "Doc—can you come over?"

"What's the trouble? Who's sick, Frank?"

"It's Alice. She—"

"Accident—illness? Tell me, man!"

"No accident. It's—well, I don't quite know. Just come on over, will you?"

"As soon as I'm free."

"Thanks." Frank hung up and went into the kitchen.

Alice stood at the big, eight-foot refrigerator. "I waited for you, dear. Are you ready?"

"Why don't you turn on the light?"

"He prefers that I don't. His eyes have grown stronger, but they're still a little weak."

"All right. Open the thing up."

Alice complied. "Say hello, darling."

"There's no light in there."

"I took the bulb out. I told you—"

"Oh, yes. He's—he's in there?" Frank caught himself peering past the ham and leftover salad into the dim depths of the box. There was a gurgling sound. "Something's spilling. You've turned over a milk bottle."

"He's having a snack. He doesn't drink much at a time, but he drinks often."

"Is—is that so?" Frank listened. The gurgling continued for a moment, then ended in what sounded like a contented

sigh. Amazing, Frank thought —the power of suggestion. He would have been willing to swear he'd actually heard the sounds.

"He's through now," Alice said.

"Yes—I guess he is."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Then Alice said, "Well—?"

"Well—?"

"Don't be impolite. Say hello to him."

Frank bent over. "Hello in there!"

The reply came in a pleasant masculine voice. "Hello out there. It's very nice to know you."

Frank turned like the walking dead and went to the telephone and got Doc Williams. He said, "Never mind coming over, Doc. It's all right. Ev—ev—everything is all right."

"You sound very strange, Frank."

"Tired—just tired, that's all."

"And Alice?"

"Fine—fine. A little headache I guess."

"Well, keep me posted."

"I'll do that." Frank hung up and walked stiffly back into the kitchen.

Frank Boland lay stiffly in his bed. He lay on his back with his eyes wide open star-

ing at the ceiling. Beside him, Alice breathed evenly as she slept.

Frank's body was still but his mind was a whirling chaos. He clearly and distinctly remembered that first *hello*. Like a knife sticking in his memory, the answering *hello* was sharp and glittering. He recalled phoning Doc Williams and canceling his call, but from that point on, things were piled in his mind like papers on an untidy desk.

The voice bolstered Alice's story. The voice said the man purporting to own it had come from Mars and was very grateful at having been taken in, and Frank had replied silently in the depths of his mind: *You aren't the only one who's been taken in, brother.*

The man said he would have been in a bad way without the comfortable temperature of the refrigerator because Mars was a pretty cold place. And he'd complimented Frank on having the biggest refrigerator in the neighborhood.

There had been a little more —as much more as Frank could stand—and then he and Alice had retired and—well, here he was.

But things were clearing a little. They really were. Enough for Frank to realize it had all been some horrible

hallucination. He'd heard of such things—or had he? At any rate, that's what this was. A mental lapse of some sort. He glanced over at Alice. Her face was serene and peaceful. And he knew she had made none of those weird statements. Absurd—completely absurd—now that he was in bed and calmed down. He'd been working too hard and had dreamed. That was it. He just thought he'd been lying here, awake. In reality, he'd been walking through a nightmare.

He felt better now that he had the truth. But there was still a tiny nagging doubt. Well, that was natural. The damned thing had been so realistic. All right. Why not scotch it once and for all? Why not?

He got out of bed and went downstairs. He went into the kitchen and stood in front of the refrigerator. He opened the door and peered in and said, "Hello in there."

Silence. Of course. How could it be otherwise. Left-over salad couldn't talk. He straightened and reached over to swing the door shut—

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I was sleeping. Do you wish to talk?" The voice was as cheerful and courteous as before.

"I—I—no—I—"

"You find it hard to sleep?"

"Sleep? oh, yes—sleep—"

Frank closed the refrigerator and found his way back upstairs. After a while, he dozed off from sheer exhaustion.

Frank was brought back to the land of the living next morning by the rattle of milk bottles. The sound made him shudder. He dressed and went downstairs and entered the kitchen just as Alice was putting the last bottle of milk into the refrigerator. He heard a *thank you* from inside the box and saw Alice smile as she replied, "Oh, that's quite all right—really it is." She turned and saw Frank. "Good morning, darling. Did you sleep well?"

"Oh, yes—for at least an hour." Frank stared at the refrigerator. "Angel—I believe you said our—our guest is not visible to the naked eye."

"That's right. No one can see him."

"Why not?"

Alice was pouring orange juice. "Because—well, because—I don't quite know, darling. He tried to explain it to me but I'm afraid it was too technical."

"I wonder if he could explain it to me?"

"I'm sure he could. You can ask him this evening. You've

got to hurry now, or you'll miss your train."

"I don't think I'll go to work today."

Alice hid her amazement under sincere delight. "Why, that would be wonderful! Having you with me all day. But why, darling? You always go to work in the morning. Aren't you feeling well?"

"Now that you mention it, I think I am a little off my usual sharp edge."

"Why don't you go back to bed? I'll bring your breakfast up to you."

"No, I think I'll go out on the patio and—and just sit for a while. I'm not hungry. I'll have a bite later." Frank went out and sat down in the warm morning sun. He wanted to be alone for a little while—to get his strength back so to speak—and to garner courage for what lay ahead.

But he'd been alone for only three or four minutes when the courteous voice said, "Good morning, Mr. Boland."

He jerked as from a sudden muscular ailment and looked around. "Are—are you here?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, yes. The heat is a little oppressive but I wanted to come out and thank you for your hospitality."

"That's quite all right.

Think nothing of it—nothing at all."

"It's mighty nice of you, Mr. Boland—you and your good wife—to take in a total stranger."

"Why, we're enjoying it immensely. And call me Frank, please do."

"Thank you. And you may call me Benny."

"Benny? That's a rather—well, earthy name, isn't it?"

"My real name could hardly be pronounced in these vibrations, but the translation is close."

"And—and how were things on Mars when you left?"

"As good as could be expected, Frank. I wasn't there too long. You see, I'm really not a native of Mars."

"Is that so? Where do you come from?"

There was a short silence before Benny answered. Finally he said, "It's a little hard to explain, Frank, in terms you would understand. You see, the last thing I'd want to do would be to hurt your feelings."

"Don't give that a thought. I promise not to be touchy." Frank realized his attitude was changing. With the initial shock over, he was coming to accept Benny even without explanation and he realized this

was an ability of the human mind. Nothing remained a wonder indefinitely. It struck him that people had been awed by the miracle of television when it had been first introduced but now they swore at their sets wholeheartedly when the intricate mechanisms went out of order.

Benny said, "Let me put it this way. I am a superior entity and it's doubtful that I could make you understand my structure or where I came from. It would be about the same as you trying to tell the bird in that tree how you drive your car."

Frank was silent and Benny spoke with concern. "I have offended you, haven't I?"

"No—no. I was just grasping it. And I understand."

"I'm very glad," Benny said warmly. "And speaking of that—it is warm out here, isn't it?"

"Would you like to get back inside? I'll get a chair and we can leave the refrigerator door open—"

"No, I'm not too uncomfortable. Tell me about your business, Frank."

"My business?"

"Yes. What you do for a living. Your ambitions and aspirations."

Frank wanted to ask Benny how he'd got a grip on the lan-

guage so quickly but he knew there would be a logical answer so he did not bother. Instead, he began talking about the bond business—how he wasn't a big operator, just one of the boys; about his wood-working hobby, his home and—well, just about everything he was interested in. Benny made it so easy to talk and the time flew by.

Benny's questions were discerning, his observations pertinent. Finally he said, "I want to do something for you and Alice—some little thing to show my heartfelt appreciation."

"That's not necessary—not at all, Benny. We're delighted to have you."

"I appreciate that, but I'll tell you what I want you to do. First, get rid of those International Gas 2½s that you're holding. The company is in bad shape."

"You know about International Gas?"

"Nothing except what logical thought progression tells me. It's obviously a dying dog, as you might say. Sell what you have. Then take the capital you release and buy a block of Ulysses Uranium."

"Good Lord, Benny—"

"It's unlisted and you may have to shop around a little but it's worth it."

"How—how big a block shall I buy?"

"Oh, quite a large one. It's a cheap stock. You should be able to find fifty thousand shares lying around." Frank gulped and while he was searching for words, Benny said, "And now, if you don't mind, I'll return to my room. This heat is stifling. We will have more interesting talks in the future."

Frank did not go to the phone immediately. He sat for half an hour fighting with himself. It was one of the hardest battles of his life. A miss on a wildcat like Ulysses Uranium could wipe him out. Yet, if he stood aside and they found an ore bed up there, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. He finally compromised. There were smaller blocks than fifty thousand shares. He'd pick up ten or perhaps fifteen.

But when he got on the phone, things worked out differently. He checked with two unlisted stock traders and then called Marty Allen at Davis & Co. Marty said, "Sure, I've got a piece of it, Frank, but aren't you roaming out of your field a little?"

"Just a hunch play. How much have you got, Marty?"

"Fifty thousand shares."

"What's the bid and offer?"
"I'm asking 1½. I can get 1¼."

"I'll take ten thousand shares at 1¾."

"The price is all right but my order reads 'all or none' at that figure. Ten thousand shares would cost you 2¼."

Frank was silent while butterflies played in his stomach. After a while, Marty Allen said, "Why don't you take the whole lump—help me out?"

"I haven't got near the cash."

"Don't worry about that. I can let you have it for ten days on a fifty-cent margin. Something might happen in the meantime."

"Sure. The company might fail."

"It's your hunch, not mine, kid."

"I'll take it," Frank said suddenly. Then he bit his lip but it was too late. He owned fifty thousand shares of a doubtful dog he knew nothing about.

"Atta boy!" Allen said heartily. "You now own it. Let me know if you get another hunch."

Frank stayed around the house and suffered until four o'clock. At that time the phone rang. He broke into a cold sweat. No doubt it was Marty calling to tell him the presi-

dent of Ulysses had taken off for South America with the funds.

It was Marty, but his information was somewhat different. He said, "Look, miracle man, what happened up there in Canada."

Frank's throat was dry. "You tell me," he said.

"Haven't got the least idea. All I know is that my customer's gone nuts. Wants his stock back."

"How much will he pay?"

"One big fat dollar more a share. I'm bidding 2 $\frac{1}{8}$. And I'm on my knees. Let me have it back, pal."

"What's the bid and asked?"

"Listen, Frank. I can make a sixteenth. A lousy sixteenth—and I've got a wife and kids."

While Frank sat mute, the quiet voice of Benny came from the doorway. "I'd sell if I were you."

Frank's words into the phone were by way of reaction—without thought: "You got the stock, Marty."

"Bless you," Marty said. "A check will be mailed. I'll remember you in my prayers."

Frank hung up and after a time remembered to say, "Thank you—thank you very much."

"You're very welcome, dear, but what did I do for you?"

Frank turned and saw Alice with a towel around her head dusting the furniture. "Where's Benny?"

"He went back into the refrigerator. The dust bothers him."

After thinking about his fifty thousand quick dollars for a few minutes, Frank got a chair and went to the refrigerator and opened the door. He sat down and asked, "Are you in there, Benny?"

"Yes."

"Comfortable?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you."

"Benny, I was just thinking. That refrigerator is rather small for a grown man. You—you are a grown man, aren't you?"

"Quite. I'm three hundred and ten years old if you want me to be exact."

"Imagine that!" Frank marveled for a moment. Then he said, "It occurred to me that we might shop around for a bigger box. Twelve or fourteen feet. Better yet, we could build an extension on the kitchen and install a stand-up refrigerator—the kind butchers use."

"That's very nice of you, but this will do nicely. I'll have to be moving on before long and I don't want you to go to any extra trouble."

"You aren't going to stay with us?"

"Not permanently. I have work to do."

"What kind of work, Benny—if I'm not too personal."

"Not at all. It's a kind of survey. I'm covering the galaxy for a governmental group who are assembling some figures."

"It must be interesting work."

"It is."

"Ah—Benny—"

"Yes?"

"How did you know Ulysses Uranium was going up? And how did you know I'd be able to find exactly fifty thousand shares?"

There was a silence and Frank thought Benny had possibly gone for a walk. Then the voice came from the refrigerator: "That's very hard to explain, Frank. I mean it would be difficult to make you understand without expanding your mind and broadening it to receive a wider thought-scope."

"I'll try very hard to understand."

"I know you will, but it isn't as simple as that. I can only put it this way. Suppose you went out in the country and found a cow. We'll assume you were able to arrest the cow's interest and then you tried to

explain the building of a barn. What would the result be?"

"The cow wouldn't understand."

"Not a single word regardless of how simple you made it. Does that help?"

"Yes, I suppose—"

"Maybe this will make it a little clearer. You yourself know that spring comes, summer will be along shortly and that fall and winter will follow, right?"

"Right."

"In a sense, that was exactly how I knew the Uranium stock would increase in value."

Frank was silent for a time and Benny finally said, "I guess I haven't helped much, have I?"

"The explanation? I wasn't thinking about that. There was something else you said."

"What?"

"That I couldn't understand unless you expanded my mind. Is that something you're able to do?"

"Yes, but—Frank, let's drop the subject. Let's not talk about it."

"But you *can* do it?"

"Certainly, but it would be very unwise."

A strange excitement filled Frank's mind, a sudden exhilaration as he envisioned the possibilities. A more highly

developed mind. The ability to see beyond the horizons that bounded mortal thought! It was breathtaking and the idea of possibly achieving it made him a little hard and greedy. "Why would it be unwise to improve one's mental scope? You might as well say it's foolish for a child to go to school."

"It's not quite the same."

"I see no difference. And if you can do it—"

Benny's voice was troubled when he answered. "Frank, you and Alice have been very good to me. I don't think I could refuse you anything you ask. But don't press me on this thing. Believe me when I tell you it would be wrong for you. Take the money and be satisfied."

"You wouldn't refuse to do it, though, if I insisted?"

"I couldn't refuse. It's within my power to give it to you and therefore I must."

"Then I want you to do it."

Benny sighed. "Frank—I'm invisible—you're not."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I guess it's impossible to make you understand."

"I'm afraid so."

"Then give me a few minutes to think it over. Come back in half an hour."

It was the longest thirty minutes Frank ever spent. He went out and paced up and down the patio. He thought how close he was to a tremendous thing—greater than any man had ever before contacted. He could not let it slip away. He seemed to have gained a power over Benny through hospitality—an absurd power to be sure—but he owed it to himself and Alice to push it relentlessly and get what he wanted. If Benny changed his mind during the half-hour, he would just have to put on greater pressure.

But Benny hadn't changed his mind. When Frank went back, Benny asked, "You've thought better of it?"

"Not at all. I'm even more sure of myself. I want the level of my intelligence broadened. I insist you go ahead with it."

"Very well, but first, I ask one thing."

"What's that?"

"We'll take a ride in the country."

"What good will that do?"

"We'll see. At any rate, it isn't too much to ask, is it?"

"I suppose not."

Frank got the Chevvy out of the garage. He stopped in the driveway and said, "Are you with me?"

"Yes. Please open the wind

wings so a cool breeze will blow in."

Frank did as Benny asked, remembering that in his excitement, he'd forgotten to tell Alice he was leaving. Well, it didn't matter. He'd be back soon. "Did I remember to thank you for the fifty thousand dollars?" he asked.

"You thanked me quite adequately."

"Fifty thousand dollars takes a lot of worry off a man's mind."

"On the contrary, it will increase your worry. You've got something to worry about, now."

Frank could not think of a logical answer and drove on in silence. After a while he asked, "Just where are we going? What are we looking for out here?"

"A pasture."

"What do we want of a pasture?"

"A cow."

"Well, there's a pasture with twenty cows. Which one do we want?"

"Let's stop here. I'll select one."

Frank pulled up and got out and stood beside the fence. He assumed Benny was with him and stared in silence as a large brindle bovine looked over from her place in the herd,

then turned and walked straight toward him.

"This is an unkind thing I'm doing, but the end—or the possible end—justifies it."

"Just what are you going to do?"

"Watch."

The cow came to the fence and stopped. She extended an inquiring nose. Then a peculiar thing happened. The animal trembled, raised its head and appeared to be listening intently.

"This is cruel," Benny said. "Very cruel, but perhaps the end will justify the means."

"I wish I knew what you were driving at."

"Look—the cow is crying."

It was true. The cow's great eyes were filled with tears. They were streaming down her face and she shook her head as though in bewilderment. Next, she went to her knees and rubbed her head in the dirt. She bawled in misery, got up and began walking in an aimless circle. She continued to bawl. Her tone was low and sad, then a touch of hysteria was blended in and the cow stopped moving and faced Frank.

Frank said, "Good Lord! There's actually an expression on her face! An expression of—"

"—agony?" Benny asked.

"That's right. What did you do to the poor creature? She's suffering."

"Exactly what you wanted me to do to you."

The cow's low, moaning bellow ceased. She stopped the strange gyrations and stood looking at Frank. Then her jaws began grinding as she again took up work on her cud. She wandered away.

"I gave her intelligence," Benny said. "Intelligence for which she was not equipped. For a few moments, she was on the mental plane of a human being. The agony came from the realization that she was trapped in the body of a cow."

"You mean that if—"

"If I gave you what you asked, it would be even worse for you. Trapped in gross flesh with the consciousness and aspirations of a bodiless entity. You would be a raving maniac in ten minutes. You would feel as though you had been sealed living in a grave."

Shaken, Frank turned and walked back to the car. He swung around and headed for home. A mile down the road, he muttered, "How could I have been such a fool?"

"You weren't a fool. It's natural for you to want to develop—to improve. And you've

been given lots of room to improve in."

"I see what you mean."

"I hope so. And one last word of advice. The years go swiftly and life was given you to be enjoyed. So do the things you want to do now—mix them with the things you have to do. You'll live longer and life will be better."

Frank said nothing. He drove on and when he reached the outskirts of the town he said, "Thanks again for the money."

"You'll find the advice far more valuable—if you take it."

And Frank knew somehow that Benny would not speak again—that he was gone.

Frank entered the kitchen and said, "I'm back, honey."

Alice looked up from the sink and smiled. "That's nice. Were you away, dear?"

He laughed and reached for her. He kissed her and said, "Pack up. We're taking a trip."

"But what about Benny?"

"Benny left."

Her face fell. "And he didn't even say good-bye!"

"He was in a hurry. He said he thought you'd understand."

"He was such a nice man!"

"We'll leave tomorrow morning. Then when we get

(Concluded on page 91)

A "Johnny Mayhem"
Adventure . . .

THEY SENT A BOY

By C. H. THAMES

The Johnny Mayhem legend can hardly be called complete without the stories of the many strange guises Mayhem used in spreading the sanity and civilization of the Galactic League across the galaxy to the Outworlds. An understanding of the Mayhem legend is impossible, however, unless one realizes that Mayhem often had no choice regarding the body his sentience inhabited. On Augon II, for example . . .

—from THE MAN WHO
SAVED THE UNIVERSE
3d edition *3104AD*





Under the combined force of young arms, the metal began to yield.

MAYHEM awoke.

For a long time he lay there, his new body gathering strength from the apparatus which nurtured it. The room, ten feet long and ten feet wide and bare except for the cot on which Mayhem reclined and the machinery overhead, was like some enormous mechanical womb.

During rebirth, he had been given memory. He let the memory run through his mind now because the first few minutes were most important. He was on the moon of Augon II, a small planet deep in the Sagittarian Swarm, fifty thousand light years from Earth. The Galactic League had not yet reached Augon II, his memory told him, but had established an observation post on the planet's single satellite.

And there was trouble on Augon II.

He smiled grimly. Trouble meant Mayhem. The Galactic League had sent him here, where a dead body had awaited him in cold storage. Another chapter of the Mayhem legend was beginning. Sitting up, he wondered what the next few days would bring. Mayhem comes to Augon II, he thought, wondering if the few Earthmen already on the

planet would fear him and hate him. They usually did.

He stood up and padded barefoot and naked across the small room to the mirror on the far wall. They always provided a mirror, not realizing that to Johnny Mayhem, after more than a hundred immigrations of his elan, the shape of the body hardly mattered. Provided it was healthy and reasonably strong and in the prime of life . . .

Mayhem stared at the mirror.

His face flushed slowly. He was suddenly very angry but the face in the mirror could not show Johnny Mayhem's anger. The face which stared back at him, rather pleasant and pink-cheeked and scrubbed-looking with wide wondering blue eyes, was that of a ten-year-old boy!

Mayhem dressed quickly in the small tunic and jumper which had been draped across the foot of the cot. He went to the door, opened it and stalked outside—if a ten-year-old, angry or not, could be said to stalk.

He'd see the Galactic League Observer, of course. If this were some kind of joke . . .

He was not very tall, even for ten years. He almost had to crane his neck to see the re-

ceptionist's face over her high desk. "I'd like to see the Observer," he said. His voice was shriller than he had expected. It made him wince.

The young woman looked at him, smiling. "Do you have an appointment?" she said, the expression on her face saying she knew he did not. "The Observer is very busy."

"He'll see me," Mayhem bristled, the words sounding ludicrous in his high voice.

"Your name, please?" The woman was smiling in amusement. A few Earthmen sitting nearby in the waiting room, probably applying for colonization permits, chuckled.

"I am Johnny Mayhem."

The young woman was still smiling. "Sure," she said, "and I am Adam Terra, Space Ranger,"—giving the name of a popular juvenile video series back on the civilized worlds.

"Just tell the Observer," Mayhem said. "As you may know, if you work for the Observer, my time on any one job is limited. The longer you—"

But the young woman wasn't listening to him. She had turned to the Earthmen in the waiting room. "Does anyone know who his father is? This is a busy office."

They all denied having any knowledge of the mildly delin-

quent boy. Mayhem shrugged in exasperation and made his way past the receptionist's desk, heading for a door marked: JONATHAN WRIGLEY, *Galactic League Observer*.

"You can't go in there!" the receptionist called. Mayhem heard her getting up, heard her high heels click-clacking across the floor toward him. She grasped him firmly by the arm and spun him around. She held his arm and stared down at him. His tousled head hardly reached her bosom. "Don't you think this has gone far enough, sonny?" she said, the smile now strained on her face. "Your Daddy ought to watch you more carefully, whoever he is."

Mayhem tried to wrench free of her grasp, but his ten-year-old body lacked the strength. He was beyond anger now. He was beginning to feel ridiculous. Johnny Mayhem, the lone wolf legend. Champion of law and order. Defender of the Galactic League. An utterly helpless young boy.

Helpless? Suddenly Mayhem began to smile. Even a youngster was not really helpless. His weapons were different, though. He could not be expected to fight adults on their own terms. He had to see the Observer at once, and he

was going to see him—using a child's weapons to do it.

He stamped his feet. He commenced yowling. The receptionist, who apparently was unmarried and had no experience with such things, seemed alarmed. She patted his head awkwardly and pleaded, "Shh! Shh, you don't have to cry, sonny. Stop crying. Stop it, please. I have some candy . . ."

He yowled as loud as he could. The Earthmen in the waiting room seemed uncomfortable. One of them got up and walked toward Johnny Mayhem, then changed his mind and returned to his seat. Mayhem went right on crying and yowling.

The door marked *Jonathan Wrigley* opened. A short, fat, balding man peered into the waiting room. His face split in a broad grin. "That would be Johnny Mayhem," he told the receptionist. "You can show him right in, Miss Benner."

"But, sir, I didn't know . . ."

"That's quite all right. You couldn't be expected to. It's Mayhem, all right. Show him in."

Mayhem turned off the tantrum like a faucet. He followed the swivel-hinged arrangement of Miss Benner's poste-

rior toward Wrigley's office. She stood aside and let him enter. She shut the door behind him.

"God damn it, Wrigley," Mayhem said in a high, piping voice. He wished the voice, at least, were more affirmative. "What the hell kind of a trick did you pull? Don't you work for the Galactic League? Aren't you interested in bringing law and order to Augon II?"

"Sit down, Mayhem," Jonathan Wrigley said. At least Wrigley seemed prepared to treat him like an adult. It made him feel somewhat better. "At the moment, the Earthman population of Augon II, including the G. L. people here at the Observation Post on the moon, is less than four hundred. The only dead body we had available for you belonged to a ten-year-old boy. You're—uh—wearing it right now. You see, we had that body in cold storage merely to meet the requirements of the League—"

Mayhem knew the requirements, of course. Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, must have a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. No one knew when Mayhem's services might be required.

No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the Hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem—Johnny Marlow, then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, six years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Sagittarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly . . . an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him . . .

"But we never expected Mayhem would actually be

sent to Augon II," Jonathan Wrigley was saying. "I don't think there are fifty settlers on the planet. Not much to worry Johnny Mayhem about, is it?"

"There is no other body available?" Mayhem asked.

"Unless you want us to kill someone," Wrigley laughed, "no." Then his face became serious. "I understand you can turn down a job, though. You can sub-space the Hub and tell them to send you someplace else, can't you?"

"Sure," Mayhem said. "Only I happen to be needed here."

"I don't see why," Jonathan Wrigley insisted.

"That's not your problem. It's the Hub's—and mine. I'll stay, Wrigley. I'll be damned if I know why, but I'll stay."

"But assuming there's some kind of trouble, what can you do about it? I mean, as a small boy."

Mayhem smiled. The face was used to smiling, he realized. Those of most children were. He wondered briefly why the boy had died so young. He said, "I'll worry about that when I see what kind of trouble." He stood up. "Well, thanks for your time, Wrigley. Incidentally, before I take the rocket down to Augon II, I'd like a blaster or an N-gun—"

Wrigley spread his hands out in a helpless gesture. "What can I do?" he demanded. "You're ten years old. It's against the law. You need a license. You have to be eighteen."

"Actually, I'm past thirty."

"Physically, you're ten. We can't license you for lethal weapons. I'm sorry, Mayhem."

The weak, undeveloped body of a ten-year-old youth. Weaponless. And trouble on Augon II. Of course it was trouble, Mayhem thought. Serious trouble. The League people didn't send him otherwise. I ought to turn it down, he thought. I'll never be able to handle it this way. But the Galactic League was depending on him. And his own life—his strange life—did not matter. It was a cipher, compared to the forward movement of human civilization.

"O.K.," Mayhem said. "I'll go down the way I am."

"Good luck," Jonathan Wrigley said.

Mayhem nodded. I'll need it, he thought.

Augon II was a small planet, no bigger than Mars, far across the Galaxy in the solar system. But Mars was a cold, semi-arid ochre desert of a world and Augon II, only

eighty million miles from its primary, a sun-sized class G star, was a hot steaming jungle of a world which had produced a riot of flora and an incredible variety of fauna. It had also produced considerable quantities of carnotite, a uranium ore, and so the Earthmen were beginning to come.

The one settlement on Augon II was situated at the confluence of two sluggish, muddy rivers. It had no name and needed no name because it was the only town on the planet. It surrounded the Augon II spacefield on three sides, which sounds like a lot but was not. The spacefield was suited only for the ferries which came down from Augon II's single satellite. The rare starships which visited the Augon system made planetfall on the satellite, transshipping their cargo of mining supplies and occasional colonists to the battered ferry which plied, when the occasion demanded its service, between Augon's moon and the planet itself.

The settlement, consisting of two dozen buildings which had been pre-fabricated on Lutonga, the nearest civilized planet, shimmered and burned in the steady mid-afternoon heat. No one was about on its

single street, since all necessary work was done at dawn or at dusk and sometimes, if absolutely necessary, far into the night.

Inside one of the pre-fabricated buildings, Andrew Wrigley paced back and forth, the sweat stiffening and salt-staining the armpits of his tunic. He could feel the heat sapping his energy, for air-conditioning had not yet come to Augon II. They could have asked for it. They had enough money for air-conditioning. But such a request would attract attention. They did not want that, not yet. Not until the planet, with its vast uranium wealth, belonged to them, lock, stock and barrel.

"Is he dead?" Andrew Wrigley asked.

"Not yet, Andy." The girl did not bother to look up. She was pretty, but looked hard. Her name was Lydia Tremaine and she had been on Augon II with Andrew Wrigley six months now. She was sitting near a cot on which a small old man lay, his chest rising and falling with rapid, shallow breathing. "What if he hadn't got sick?" she asked. "What would you have done, Andy?"

"What's the difference?" he snapped.

"I just want to know, that's all."

"Well, forget it. He's got jungle fever, hasn't he? He's going to die. Right?"

"Yes. He's going to die. Unless we call a doctor from the Observation Post. But we won't, Andy. Will we?"

"Yes, we will," Andrew Wrigley said, smiling. "When we're sure it's too late. I think it would be safe to call a doctor now."

"Let's wait until tomorrow and make sure. If he lives, we're all washed up. Even if he talks deliriously, we're all washed up. You know that, don't you?"

Andrew Wrigley nodded. "I almost forgot to tell you," he said. "My father called, from the moon."

"What did he want?"

Wrigley sat down. His faded trousers stuck to his flanks with sweat. Later he would have to go outside in the searing heat and meet the satellite ferry. He shuddered, thinking of it. His heat rash itched intolerably. The ointment hardly helped. It would be a hundred and thirty degrees out there—in the shade.

"He told me Mayhem's coming," Wrigley said.

"God, Andrew. Oh, God. What will we do?" Lydia stood

up, moved away from the bed where the old prospector was dying. She walked to the window and looked out at the parched brown landscape.

"Take it easy," Wrigley said.

"Take it easy? With Mayhem coming here? You've heard about him, haven't you? Andrew, what shall we do?"

"We can take care of Mayhem."

"If he finds out how we've been claim-jumping, if he finds out how Augon II will belong to us—our world—while your old man lets most of the colonizers cool their heels on the moon, if . . ."

"Maybe he'll find out," Andrew said. "I wouldn't worry about it, though. The Mayhem legend is coming to Augon II, Lydia, but it's going to die here."

Lydia Tremaine frowned. "I wonder how many people on how many worlds have said *that* before."

"This is different."

"Why? What did your old man tell you?"

Andrew Wrigley laughed softly. "They gave Mayhem a body, all right. They had to. They didn't want any trouble with the Hub. My old man didn't. But it was some body. Get this, Lydia." He laughed again. "Johnny Mayhem is

coming here on the ferry today—as a ten-year-old boy!"

Lydia stared at him. It took a few moments for the fact to sink in, then she added her laughter to his own. "A kid," she said. "Johnny Mayhem, the scourge of the Galaxy. A baby. I just hope he starts something, that's all. I just hope."

"You see, honey?" Andrew Wrigley said. "We don't have a thing to worry about. Come here."

"It's too hot."

"Come here anyhow."

She came to him. He hugged her briefly, then let her go. She wiped sweat off her forehead and licked her parched lips. "Some day this planet will be big," he said. "Important. They'll bring some pressure domes and temperate Earth climate. They'll bring in a few hundred thousand colonizers. Two, three years from now. Can you wait, baby?"

"I'll wait."

"And when they come, we'll own the place. The whole world. Every rock of it. How would you like that, baby? Augon II, that's a lousy name. We'll call the place Lydia, maybe. After you."

"Andy—"

"Still worried about Mayhem?"

"A little kid? Very funny." She winked at him. "If Mayhem tries anything, I'll turn him over my knee and spank him."

"If he tries anything," Andrew Wrigley said, "we'll wring his small neck."

The satellite ferry came down spewing rocket fire on the small scarred landing field. There was a small consignment of mining equipment from the Capellan system, far across the Galaxy. There was only one passenger, a ten-year-old boy who had died but who was alive again—for one month—and who now was Johnny Mayhem. Culling his new memories on the short space-hop from Augon II's satellite, Mayhem had learned why he had been sent to the out-of-the-way planet.

It was uranium. The ore assayed very rich. The mining colonists were en route from a hundred other Outworlds. But for some reason, only a few had managed to reach Augon II. Red tape held them up on the satellite. Naturally, Mayhem thought, that would require investigation. But the situation on Augon II was even stranger. Except for a few unimportant mines, all the claim-permits which had come through for clearance at

the Hub were under only two names: Andrew Wrigley and Lydia Tremaine. Andrew Wrigley—the Observer's son.

Such things might happen legally, Mayhem knew. Mining colonists and prospectors had not reached Augon II in great numbers yet. Because the elder Wrigley was holding them up? Perhaps. On the surface, Mayhem thought, it didn't seem like much. An out-of-the-way world with a few score colonists—

But he had seen worlds owned by small groups and sometimes worlds owned by one man. Worlds which had started out like Augon II and which had grown big because they were rich in foodstuffs to feed the Galaxy's enormous population or rich in cheap building materials or rich in gold—or uranium. He had seen whole populations bled dry by a few unscrupulous individuals who arrived early and covered their crimes with a few quadrillion miles of empty space.

If he could help it, that wouldn't happen on Augon II.

He grinned at his translucent reflection in the observation port as the ferry made planetfall. If he could help it. A ten-year-old boy, and an under-sized one at that. What did he weigh—sixty pounds?

He couldn't even carry a weapon, at least, not legally. He was still grinning. Naturally, the legal angle didn't bother him. Since he worked for the Galactic League in an unofficial capacity, it would not have to answer for his actions.

But getting a weapon if he needed one might be something else again. For a small boy . . .

"Mr. Mayhem," the man said. He did it very well. Straight-faced. Not the suggestion of a smile. He was a tall sun-darkened man in a sweat-stained tunic and trousers. His light hair had been bleached almost white by the strong actinic rays of Augon II's primary. He looked down at Mayhem quite earnestly, as if the boy's age meant nothing to him. "It's a pleasure to know you. I'm Andrew Wrigley."

Mayhem shook hands with him. Then Wrigley was glancing behind him toward the open port of the ferry. "Are you the only passenger?" he asked. He sounded disappointed.

"I think so."

"That's too bad. We were hoping the doctor would be here," Wrigley lied. "We've got a sick prospector on our

hands. Jungle fever. I don't think he'll live very long unless—"

"I know something about medicine," Mayhem said. "Maybe I can have a look at him."

For the first time, something of a my-dear-boy attitude came into Wrigley's tone. "You?" he said. "But you don't know anything about Augon jungle fever. What could you do?"

"Well, I could have a look at him anyway. Do you have any medicine for it?"

"Unfortunately," Wrigley said quickly, "it's all used up; that's why I was hoping the doctor—"

"Where is this man?"

"He's over there." Wrigley pointed toward one of the pre-fab houses.

"Well, we've got to get in out of the sun anyway. Might as well have a look at him."

Wrigley shrugged as they walked toward the house. Mayhem could feel the fierce heat sapping his energy with every step he took. He looked back at the space-ferry. The cargo was not being unloaded. Probably, he thought, they would unload it at dusk, when the enervating heat abated.

"By the way, Mr. Mayhem," Wrigley said as they neared the featureless side of the pre-

fab house, "you haven't said why you came to Augon II. It surprises me that the Galactic League is interested in something here."

Mayhem said nothing.

"Well, aren't you going to tell me?"

Mayhem turned around slowly as they reached the door. "Listen," he said. "You know more than people usually do. I don't go around broadcasting my identity. But under the circumstances—" he gestured to indicate his frail body "—I don't see what choice I have. People just wouldn't listen to a child, would they?"

"Now that you mention it," Wrigley said evenly, "no. No, they wouldn't. They wouldn't listen to him at all."

"So, you know who I am. But that's all you'll know."

"You won't answer a civil question?"

"I won't answer the question you asked me."

Shrugging, Wrigley led the way inside. Mayhem could smell the sick, dying man on the bed even before he could see him. It was dark in the small room, the shades drawn over its two windows to keep the midday sun out. Someone moved toward Mayhem out of the shadows near the bed.

"Is this Johnny Mayhem?" Lydia asked Wrigley.

"You're looking at him."

"Don't mind it if I smile, Mr. Mayhem," Lydia said. "I'm sure you can understand. But anyhow, how do you do?"

Mayhem shook hands with her as Wrigley said, "This is my fiancee, Lydia Tremaine." She was a tall girl, almost as tall as Wrigley himself. Much taller than Mayhem. But then, anyone but a midget would be. She looked strong and capable. She was pretty, but the parching sun of Augon II had made her face look hard.

"How's old Lawlor?" Wrigley asked her. "Mayhem wants to have a look at him."

"Still alive, but I don't know for how long unless the doctor . . . by the way, where is the doctor?"

"He didn't come," Wrigley said.

"Poor Lawlor." Lydia shook her head.

They were either very good at it or they were telling the truth, Mayhem decided. "Let me have a look at the patient," he said.

Lydia and Wrigley looked at each other. Mayhem tried to read their faces but failed. "Just let him rest," Lydia said. "Don't disturb him. Here, I'll go over and help you."

Together, the tall girl and Johnny Mayhem walked to Lawlor's deathbed. He was breathing shallowly, his mouth open and dry, his rib-cage fluttering up and down weakly.

"The poor thing," Lydia Tremaine whispered. "He doesn't have much time left."

Mayhem leaned over the bed and lifted the old man's scrawny wrist. The pulse was rapid, weak and unsteady. The skin felt unnaturally dry and very hot.

"Does he have any family?" Mayhem asked.

"He's here alone," Wrigley said.

"Nice of you to take him in like this."

"He has no one," Lydia told Mayhem. "No one. Sick like that, if we didn't look after him, who would?"

"You see," Wrigley went on for her, "I feel it's my obligation. After all, my father is Galactic League Observer here."

Mayhem suddenly wished he had a cigarette. The craving was purely mental, he knew. His ten-year-old body couldn't possibly be involved. He said, "I was wondering. Before I left Augon's satellite, I heard no talk of a doctor being sent for."

Wrigley frowned. "Is that right?"

"Wouldn't they have mentioned something, even if he wasn't able to make that ferry?"

"I'd think so," Wrigley agreed. "Well, perhaps they figured the doctor was needed for something more important on the satellite."

"Wrigley, this man is dying."

"That's it, Mayhem. That's it exactly. Dying. He doesn't have a chance. Few people survive Augon jungle fever, and those only if they're young and it's caught in the earliest stages. From the description I radio'd in, they probably figured Lawlor was already a goner."

"It's a pretty cold-blooded decision to make," Mayhem said.

"Trying to survive on a frontier world, Mr. Mayhem, can be a pretty cold-blooded business. Wait until you've seen Augon II for a while," Wrigley suggested.

Mayhem was about to answer him, but at that moment the lips of the dying man on the bed began to move. The eyes remained shut. No expression touched the deathly pallor of the face, but the man was trying to say something. "Quick," Mayhem ordered, "bring him water."

Lydia Tremaine soon returned with a glass of water. Mayhem took it from her, placed it carefully at Lawlor's swollen, parched lips. The old man gulped weakly, but couldn't hold the water down. He was still mumbling, barely audibly.

"We're friends," Mayhem coaxed. "We want to help you."

The eyelids fluttered. The eyes opened, stared vacantly at Mayhem. The corners of the lips lifted slightly in a smile. "It's your old grandpa," Lawlor said distinctly.

"He thinks I'm his grandson," Mayhem whispered to the others. "That's a lucky break. Maybe he'll talk to us now."

"But what could he possibly say?" Lydia Tremaine asked.

"Now . . . son," old Lawlor croaked. "You be sure . . . and tell your ma and pa . . . don't bother comin' here to . . . Augon like they was planning. It's no . . . good. Won't have . . . chance . . . all sewed up. You see they listen, huh? Clever. His father. Permits over our heads . . . could cancel them . . . got to listen to him . . . hope someday he'll give us a windfall . . ."

"He's obviously delirious," Lydia Tremaine said.

Mayhem shook his head.

"He's babbling insanely," Wrigley insisted.

" . . . don't want much, son," Lawlor went on. "Just a . . . holding for the . . . family. Uranium. In charge of assaying . . . see? You can make all . . . claims you want. If you find something, though, you better sign . . . to him. Otherwise . . . man will cancel your colonization permit . . . will you be? Tell your folks, son. I'm . . . I'd like t'see your mother, but . . . I loved her and you, son . . . why I came here . . ."

The old eyes glazed over, the tongue protruded from the suddenly slack mouth. Lydia Tremaine brought the sheet up over Lawlor's emaciated chest and gaunt face, almost gratefully. Mayhem thought.

"Funny how a man can rant when he's dying," she said.

"Didn't make any sense at all," Wrigley agreed.

"Maybe," Mayhem said. "Where can I find the rest of the colonists?"

"Oh, around," Wrigley told him. "There aren't many. They sleep a lot during the day, or some of them are over at the rec hall. It gets plenty hot here."

"So I noticed. Well, I think I'll go over to the rec hall, if you don't mind." Mayhem stood there for a moment. He

almost expected them to stop him in some way. A look of alarm passed between them, but then Wrigley smiled.

"You don't believe anything he was raving about, do you?"

Instead of answering, Mayhem said, "I think I'll ask some questions in the rec hall." If the colonists were afraid, he thought, their answers might tell him nothing. But if Wrigley became scared enough, he might reveal his hand.

"Don't ask the man at the rec hall to serve you anything stronger than ginger ale," Wrigley said, and laughed immoderately.

It was the largest building on the nameless town's one street. Otherwise, it was almost featureless. The false fronts which had adorned buildings on Earth in the Old West, and which for a time had been the style on the closer Outworlds, had given way finally to the drab but inexpensive pre-fab construction. A sign above the building's single entrance proclaimed it to be the Augon II Recreation Hall. Mayhem heard the sounds of laughter drifting out into the hot, still air. He wished for the hundredth time that they had given him a full-grown body.

Sooner or later here on Augon II he would need it.

Shrugging, Mayhem pushed open the door and went inside. It was even hotter within the rec hall. The air was perfectly still and laden with cigarette smoke and the smell of stale beer. The colonists sat around at rough-hewn wooden tables, wearing slacks or shorts but no shirts. The few women present added skimpy halters to their costume. Everyone was sweating. Mayhem began to wonder how the beer could be kept cold, then decided—when he saw the enormous foamy heads on the beermugs—that it was served at tepid room temperature. He walked toward the bar, where half a dozen men were sitting. To his left, a newly painted ping-pong table gleamed under a bright overhead light. It looked as though it had never been used. You don't feel like exerting yourself in near-140 degree heat. Someone glared at the overhead light as if it were his personal enemy, walked over to it, shut it and returned to his table.

Reaching the bar, Mayhem remembered Wrigley's words and ordered a ginger ale. The barman looked at him and said, "What do you want to be served here for, sonny? Why don't you go downstairs with

the rest of the kids? It's cooler, anyway."

"I was looking for someone," Mayhem said vaguely.

"Well, don't. The older folks don't like it, see what I mean? That's why they're here instead of at home. You go downstairs like a good little boy."

"Why don't you give him a quart of hooch to bring down with him, Sam?" someone chortled.

"Probably down it a lot faster'n you," someone else called.

All at once Mayhem knew he would get no answers from these people, even if he could remain here talking to them. On the other hand, the barman had told him the children were downstairs. His peers, he thought, smiling in grim amusement. Children on Augon II lacked all the little diversions taken for granted on more civilized worlds. As a result, Mayhem figured, they probably knew more than might be expected about their parents' business. It might be a very good idea for Mayhem to question the children, with whom he would be on even terms.

Mayhem turned around, found the stairs behind the ping-pong table, and descended them.

It was cooler in the basement. And more noisy. Not one but several ping-pong contests were under way, despite the heat. Three or four boys and a girl were bowling duckpins. Others played checkers. Everyone was speaking loudly, animatedly. Mayhem judged there were almost two dozen children present, ranging from about six to sixteen or seventeen years in age. Probably, this was the entire juvenile population of Augon II, or close to it. Since the weather made outdoor play all but impossible, the children settled for the basement of the rec hall.

As Mayhem reached the bottom stair, the loud talking abruptly ceased. Not gradually, but all at once. A girl who had been banging away with one finger at the baby grand piano in the corner turned around on the swivel chair and stared boldly at Mayhem. The others were staring at him too.

A freckle-faced boy Mayhem's age said, "Hey, look, a new guy."

"When'd you come?"

"You stayin'?"

"His old man must be crazy, like ours. Hey, his old man must be a regular nut. Huh?"

"Say, what's your name, skinny?"

"Skinny, that's his name. You just said it. Lookit him."

They gathered around Mayhem, some of them even climbing the stairs above him. Like children all over the Galaxy, he thought. But more outspoken, bolder—and tougher too—because they were here on Augon II.

"I'll answer all your questions," Mayhem said, "after you answer some for me. Fair enough?"

"He wantsa make bargains," one of the boys said. "Tell him."

"What's your name, kid?"

After that last question, there was a sudden silence. Mayhem looked up at the boy who had spoken. He was a very big, very sullen, thirteen or fourteen. He leered down at Mayhem, awaiting his answer. Clearly, he was the leader here.

"You said you wanted to ask us something."

"That's right. Why are all your folks taking orders from Wrigley and Miss Tremaine?"

There was a silence. A shocked silence, Mayhem thought. Finally, the aggressive fourteen-year-old asked him, "Are you calling our folks yellow?"

"I'm not calling them anything. I'm just asking a question."

"But you are calling them yellow?"

"You tell him, Frankie!" someone shouted.

"Why are they taking orders from Wrigley?" Mayhem repeated. "Why do they jump to his tune? Why do they turn their good claims over to him without a fight? Don't they realize that if they all stick together, there's nothing Wrigley can do about it even though his father's the Galactic League Observer on the moon?"

"You better shut up fast," Frankie snapped belligerently. "Unless you want *your* old man's permit to get snapped up. You're new here, so you better not go around shooting off your mouth until you learn the score. See?"

"I'm here alone," Mayhem said slowly. "But I was wrong. Maybe your parents aren't yellow. You're yellow."

They closed in around him, muttering. Frankie said, "You better take that back."

"If you're afraid of Wrigley, you're yellow. I'll say it again. And if your folks are afraid of Wrigley, then they are yellow too."

"Okay," Frankie said angrily. "Okay, kid. You asked for it."

A few of the boys came for-

ward and pushed the crowd back, clearing a circle around them. "Keep out of this," one of them said. "Let Frankie take care of him."

"I don't want to fight with Frankie or anybody," Mayhem said. "I came here to help you."

"Now who's yellow?" a girl taunted him.

"Maybe *this* will help you," Frankie said, and came at Mayhem, fists flailing.

He was twice Mayhem's size and probably double his weight, yet Mayhem knew he could take him. For Mayhem had learned every fighting trick there was across fifty thousand light years of Milky Way Galaxy. But he suddenly knew it was important not to make a brawl of it. He had to beat Frankie swiftly, decisively, in a way the tough kids on Augon II had never seen someone beaten before. And he had to do it without even raising a sweat in the intense heat.

He sidestepped Frankie's first lunge. He then caught Frankie right fist and pivoted, still holding it, using his own hip as a fulcrum. Frankie went sailing over his head and landed in the crowd. He got up fast, shook the hair out of his eyes, bellowed, and charged again.

This time Mayhem picked

the right cross off in mid-air with his left hand, bringing the flat of his own right hand down in a short, savage chopping arc at the side of Frankie's neck. It hit like a cleaver hitting a side of beef and Frankie stumbled forward toward Mayhem, already out on his feet. Mayhem decided Frankie had taken enough punishment, although he didn't feel that with his own puny body he had taken advantage of the bigger, heavier boy. Frankie had taken enough, but perhaps the crowd hadn't. And if Mayhem expected any allies among the people of Augon II, he would find them only among the children . . .

He turned and walked nonchalantly away from the stumbling, reeling Frankie, like a bullfighter contemptuous of the animal he would soon slay. The bigger boy lunged for him with a look of desperation on his face. Still nonchalantly, still with his back turned, Mayhem drove his elbow into Frankie's stomach. Three boys came forward and caught him as he fell.

It was Mayhem who went swiftly to the sink and returned with a water-soaked rag, Mayhem who squeezed the rag over Frankie's face, Mayhem

who nursed him back to consciousness. All the fight had gone from Frankie's eyes when he came to. It was replaced by infinite respect. "I always said the guy who could lick me would be in charge of the kids here," he said to Mayhem. "But, holy mackerel, I didn't even touch you. Where did you learn to fight?"

"Around," Mayhem said vaguely.

"How old are you, kid? You don't even look hardly more than ten or maybe eleven."

"Look," Mayhem said, "I don't want to take your place as leader. I won't even be staying here very long. But I'd still like to have those questions I asked answered."

"Aw," Frankie said, sitting up, "all right. It's just . . . we're not supposed to talk about it. That's what my old man said. That's what they all said. They're scared."

"Mayhem nodded. "I know they're scared."

"No. Unless you been around here, you don't know what it's like. We're only kids, but we can see it. Our folks don't realize that, but we know what's been goin' on. Look. They come here all bustin' with hope inside. This is it. This is their chance, all their lives they been waiting for it. Oh, maybe they ain't gonna strike

it real rich, like millionaires or something, but if they work hard there ain't no reason why they can't get a real solid claim to work and be comfortable all the rest of their lives.

"That's the way they come here, Johnny. All bustin' with hope inside. Then they see what it's like. It makes a guy wish he was a man so he could go over there an' . . . aw, what's the use? We can't do nothin'."

"No," Mayhem said. "Go on. Please."

"That Mr. Wrigley and that Miss Tremaine. They got our folks over a barrel. What can they do? If they find a good claim, Wrigley says gimme. They got to. Wrigley's old man could cancel their colonization permits without batting an eyelash. He could always find some kind of an excuse, and even if it ain't legal, who's got the money to hire a good lawyer? Besides, that's the way he's really got our folks over the barrel. Most of them don't even have enough cash to take the starship out of the Augon II system, if they get kicked out. So, they can't help themselves. They've got to listen to Wrigley. Now you see what it's like?"

"Yes," Mayhem said. "But listen, Frankie. What if an

official of the Galactic League came here and discovered what was going on? He could probably send the Wrigleys and Miss Tremaine to jail for a long time, couldn't he? Then your folks would be all right."

Frankie shrugged. "Yeah, that sounds great. Only, why should an official from the Galactic League come to this unimportant little planet? Especially since old man Wrigley keeps on handing in favorable reports?"

"He's already here," Mayhem said quietly. "He's right here in this room."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I can help you," Mayhem said. "I can help your folks."

"You? You're only a kid. Why, even I must be four years older than you, but I'm only a kid too. What are you talking about?"

"Just trust me, that's all. I'm going to Wrigley's place now. I'm going to place Wrigley under citizen's arrest. Miss Tremaine too."

"But how—?"

"Don't worry," Mayhem said. "I can do it. After that, though, I'll need help. I'll have to take over the space-ferry and surprise the older Mr. Wrigley on the moon."

"No, you won't," Frankie said. "He's coming here to-

night in his private ship. Some kind of a conference. Everybody knows about it."

"That's better than I could have hoped for," Mayhem said. "All right, then. You'll help me?"

"Gee," Frankie said. "You sound so sure and all."

"This is what I want you to do." Mayhem outlined his plan rapidly for about ten minutes, then went upstairs and outside to the hot late afternoon sunshine of Augon II.

Today should tell the answer, he thought. Today and tonight.

"Well," Lydia Tremaine said. "Mr. Mayhem is back. Did you learn anything?"

"Plenty," Mayhem told her, closing the door behind him. "I see Lawlor's body isn't here."

"It was taken out to the mortuary," Lydia Tremaine said. "Back of the church."

"Where's Wrigley?" Mayhem asked. Except for him and Lydia Tremaine, the room was empty.

"His father is coming in earlier than expected. He's out waiting to meet his father now. Why, is there anything you want to see him about?"

"Yes. But I can start with you, Miss Tremaine. It's something the colonists here on

Augon II should have realized a long time ago. A couple of rotten apples shouldn't be allowed to spoil the whole barrel. Sure, they were scared, but they could have placed you under citizen's arrest at any time. As I'm going to do."

"What did you say?"

"I said, I'm placing you under citizen's arrest, Miss Tremaine."

"You make me laugh, Mayhem. What's the charge?"

"Conspiracy to illegally void colonization permits."

"I won't admit it for a moment, but how are you going to enforce your citizen's arrest? Maybe you forget you're a child."

"I haven't forgotten," Mayhem said levelly. "What are you going to do about it?"

For answer, Lydia Tremaine ran across the room toward a wall cabinet. Mayhem sprinted after her, reaching it a split-second after she did. She clawed frantically at the cabinet, turned and faced Mayhem with a blaster in her hand. Mayhem chopped at her wrist with the edge of his palm and the blaster went clattering across the floor. Mayhem dived for it, the woman right behind him. He got the blaster and held her at bay with it.

Then Andrew Wrigley said

softly from the doorway. "You can drop it now, sonny."

Mayhem let the blaster fall. Wrigley came into the room carrying an N-gun and smiling. "He knows?" Wrigley asked Lydia Tremaine.

"He knows, the little rat." She scooped up the blaster and drove its butt against Mayhem's jaw. Mayhem reeled backwards and fell against the wall, wiping blood from his lips. "What can we do about him, Andrew?"

"We can't let him leave here alive."

"But—murder? We never had to—"

"Lydia, be calm. Do you realize how big this is? What it can mean to both of us? Would you let Mayhem stop us?"

"No," she said. She looked down at Mayhem. Hate and fear glittered in her eyes. "Is your father here yet?"

"The ship's on its way down now. I came back because I decided you should meet him with me. All right?"

"Sure, but you're forgetting about Mayhem."

"No, I'm not. I'll put the Nerve gun on low intensity and stun him. He won't go anywhere. We can worry about Johnny Mayhem later."

Worry about him later,

Mayhem thought. That meant, kill him later. It was all over — everything — if Wrigley used the Nerve gun on him now. It was almost incredible, Mayhem thought, how a legend could perish in the body of a ten-year-old boy.

Mayhem stood up while Wrigley began to alter the mechanism of his N-gun. "Cover him with the blaster while I change this," Wrigley told the woman. "I've got it all figured out now. We stun Mayhem now, then kill him with the N-gun later. It doesn't leave any traces. It short circuits all the nerve-cells. The lungs forget to breathe. The heart forgets to beat. Not a trace, Lydia. If we can dispose of Mayhem's body someplace outside, they might even think the heat got him. It's happened before, a boy lost out there, a few miles from town, his body dehydrating quickly in the heat . . ."

"Keep back!" Lydia Tremaine shouted as Mayhem took a step toward her. He took another step, ignoring the blaster she waved at him. The plan was good, he thought. It was too good. It was so good, they would be reluctant to blast him and ruin it.

Outside, there was a sudden shuddering roar as the spaceship made planetfall. Involun-

tarily, Lydia Tremaine glanced toward the window. Mayhem launched himself at her, covering the distance in a great leap in Augon II's lesser gravity. They struggled for possession of the blaster, the strong young woman and the very young boy.

"Low intensity now!" Wrigley cried. "Look out, Lydia."

Mayhem felt the searing beam. His left arm from the elbow down went numb. But Lydia Tremaine collapsed at his feet.

"Drop it," Mayhem said, pointing her blaster at Wrigley. Wrigley dropped the N-gun. "Let's go outside and meet your father's ship now," Mayhem suggested.

"Those crazy kids," someone said. "Gathering on the spacefield like that, right near the blasting area."

"Get themselves hurt," someone else agreed.

"It looks like darned near every kid in town."

Mayhem grinned. It was darned near every kid in town. Making sure the elder Wrigley wouldn't try to blast off suddenly in his spaceship—unless he wanted to incinerate all of them with the backlash.

The children were smiling and laughing but would not be budged. They moved in a

hurry when they saw Mayhem, though. They made a path for him and he went through to the gleaming hull of the spaceship with Andrew Wrigley.

Just then the port opened. Jonathan Wrigley's plump, bald head appeared. "What's going on here?" he laughed nervously. "Children's Crusade?" He laughed again.

"Something like that," Mayhem agreed. "You're under arrest, Wrigley. Get out of that ship."

The elder Wrigley looked down at his son, who cowed in front of Mayhem and Mayhem's blaster. The elder Wrigley blinked, shook his head, ducked back inside the spaceship and slammed the port.

"Crash it," Mayhem said.

Half of the children gathered around the spaceship detached themselves from the crowd and went off in search of a battering ram. They returned ten minutes later with a long metal pre-fab bench from the rec hall. They ran it against the spaceship's airlock. They backtracked and ran the battering ram forward again. On the fifth try, the airlock door shook and fell inward. They swarmed inside the ship.

"Crazy kids," someone said.

Mayhem couldn't help grin-

ning. Magnificent kids, he thought. Doing what their parents had not done . . .

They brought Jonathan Wrigley out to Mayhem. They lined him up against the ship's hull with his son. Mayhem gave the blaster to Frankie. "Can you keep and watch them?"

"You bet."

"For a few days if necessary?"

"Sure can. Don't worry about it."

"Good. I'm going inside to call the Hub."

Half an hour later, Mayhem came outside again. He had called Galactic League Headquarters at the Hub of the Galaxy and told them what had happened on Augon II. They were sending a League ship through sub-space to restore the legal colonization procedure and take the Wrigleys into custody.

Finally, they had asked Mayhem, "Do you want us to amend the Mayhem regulation? I mean, about the cold storage body? So they won't foist a kid's body on you again?"

Mayhem grinned. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "All the kids around here seemed to do all right for themselves."

Outside, Frankie told May-

hem: "See, I'm still watching them."

"That's good," Mayhem said. He was thinking, I still have almost a month in this body. Maybe I'll take a vacation somewhere. A vacation, as usual, was very much overdue for Johnny Mayhem.

"But who are you, Johnny? You haven't told us who you really are."

"Just a kid like you," Mayhem said. "Any kid."

He entered Jonathan Wrigley's spaceship. Wrigley wouldn't need it where he was going. Mayhem sealed the airlock with a temporary patch, and waved from the observa-

tion port. The kids filed away from the blast-off apron in orderly fashion.

They were waving. Mayhem waved back. Some of the adults had come down to the landing field and were smiling now, not knowing yet all that had happened, but seeing the Wrigleys in custody and maybe, Mayhem thought, beginning to hope again.

Mayhem blasted off and watched Augon II streak away behind him. He contacted the Hub and they told him, "We've got another one for you, Johnny. A big one."

His vacation could wait. It always did.

THE END

THE MAN IN THE ICE BOX

(Concluded from page 67)

back I'm going to set up my woodworking shop. Going to take things easier. Mix pleasure with business. Have more time for you."

"That will be wonderful, darling."

"You bet!"

"And I suppose I can call the dairy and tell them to stop delivering all that milk."

"If he ever comes back we'll reorder."

"I hope he does."

"I think maybe he will—some day."

THE END

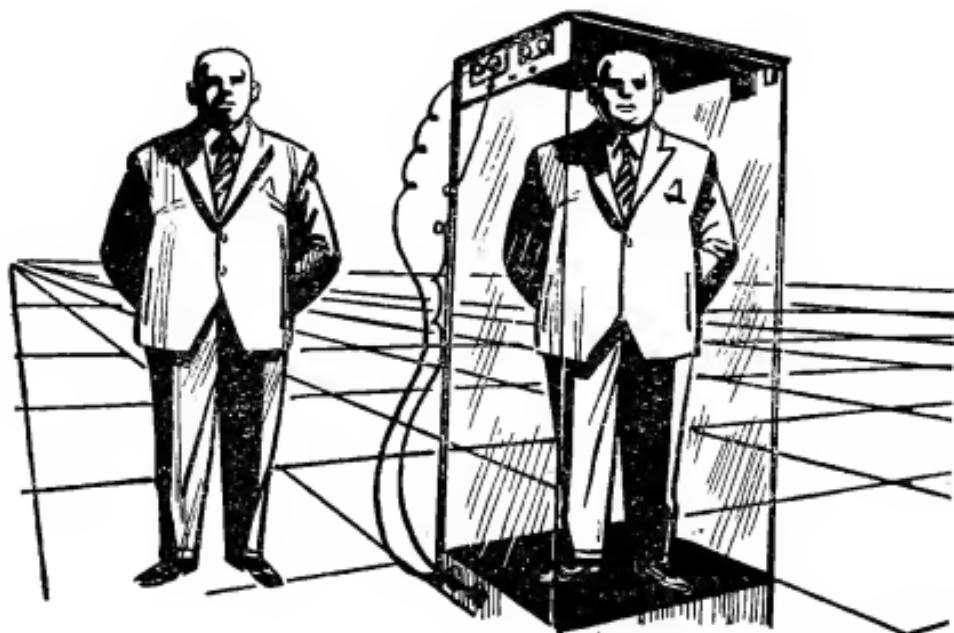
Let's Do It Again

By IVAR JORGENSEN

If you could have one moment of your past to live over again, which would you select? Marty Pennington thought he knew the choice he'd make—but that was before Sally Hays' lovely legs turned out to be the dominant factor in his future!

MARTY PENNINGTON, feature writer for the *Daily Blade*, headed toward Classified that morning. He did so for a number of reasons. First, he didn't have an idea in his head. The town was

as clean of feature ideas as he'd ever seen it. Second, there might just be a screwball ad worth following up—something worthy of at least a few lines in a box on page six. And third, Sally Hays had very



nice legs that she didn't mind displaying rather generously if the right people came along. Marty had been trying to make himself a "right person" for quite a while so he could get in a little missionary work and pursue his calling at the same time.

The legs were as nice as ever and so was Sally. She flipped her blonde curls and said, "Marty, my precious. You look betrayed."

"That I am. When are you going to wed me and start raising children? You'd look awfully good raising children."

"I know—and you'd have a lot of fun arranging it."

"You're cynical, pet. Be serious."

"Can't, sweet. I'm waiting for Joe. Can't be serious with anyone except Joe."

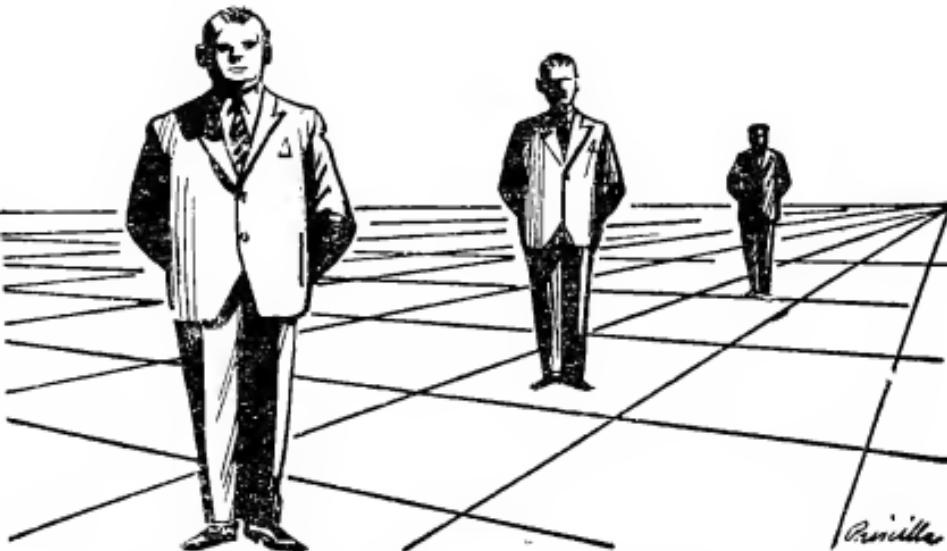
"He's not coming back. You know that."

"We plighted our troth all over the place back in Arapahoe. In Aunt Helleu's rose-covered arbor and I know Joe will come and find me soon."

"Damn Joe," Marty said. "Damn rose-covered arbors. Damn Aunt—"

"Marty!"

"Sorry."



Time is a vast plain—where nothing changes but the clock!

Sally came close and brushed her lips across Marty's forehead. "If it wasn't Joe, angel, it *would* be you—honest."

"That helps a lot." Marty turned and moved toward the door.

He was halfway out when Sally called. "Are you looking for work?"

Marty strolled back. "Such as—"

"A screwball ad that might interest you."

"Give."

Sally ran her blue eyes down a proof sheet and pointed. "Right there. It's been in three days. Might be worth a little leg work."

"Don't mention legs, baby. The hurt goes deep." Marty read the bold-faced type in the box Sally indicated:

LOST MOMENTS RECOVERED

Are there any precious moments in your past life you would like to regain? Any past moment of triumph or happiness you would like to relive? Contact me immediately.

Box 650M Daily Blade.

"Some odd-ball for sure," Sally said.

"It's blind. Get me the address, will you, baby?"

"Right away."

Sally thumbed through her

file and brought out a card and wrote an address on a note pad. Marty tore it off and put it in his pocket. At the door, he turned back again and as Sally sat down and brushed her skirts into place, Marty spoke wistfully. "Take care of them while I'm gone, honey."

"Will do, pet."

"After all, we wouldn't want Joe to come back and find one of them missing."

The Faber Building was a ratty structure on the wrong side of town. The lobby was neglected and the elevator squeaked and Marty knew what he'd find on the fourth floor. Some slick, fast-talking operator with a brassy front who should be in jail and probably would be unless he remained agile and fast on his feet.

The name on the door told nothing but it was an intriguing name nonetheless—*Fabian Six*. Showed imagination, but exactly what kind, Marty could not deduce. He opened the door and went inside. It was a sparsely furnished cubicle—no private office beyond a frosted glass door. You were facing the boss as soon as you stepped in from the hall.

But the man sitting behind the desk was a complete con-

tradiction of all Marty's pre-conceived ideas. He was far from slick and only the blind could have called his front *brassy*. He was an ingrown little middle-aged man with sad eyes and a suit of clothes that fitted him very badly.

But his approach—if it could be called that—was unique. He blushed and said, "Please don't mind my suit. I bought it at a second-hand store. It was the only one I could afford."

"Your suit? Why bring that up?"

"You were thinking of it, weren't you? Scorning it in your mind?"

It was Marty's turn to redder. "Are you Fabian Six?"

"That's my name. I know it sounds strange to you but the fashion in names changed during five hundred years in the future."

Marty turned wary. This one was no racketeer. This one was for the happy house, with bars, and with pads on all the sharp corners. He sat down carefully on an old straight-backed chair.

"It's natural that you would think me insane," Fabian Six said, "but I'm not, really. It's just as I said—things are different in the future." Marty clawed around in his mind for a few words but couldn't find

any and Six went on: "I'm not sure whether I want you to write a feature story on my activities or not. I do need the publicity, goodness knows, but I'm not sure you could give me the right sort."

Marty scanned his mind for a method of pushing through this maze. Finally he said, "Would you mind answering a few questions, Mr. Six?"

"I'd be happy to."

"By the way—my name is Martin Pennington. I'm a—"

"Yes, I know. You're a feature writer on the *Daily Blade*—where I place my ad."

"That's right. And now would you mind telling how you're able to ride along in front of me? How you know what I'm thinking before I think of it myself? How you—?"

"Perhaps a simple clarifying statement would be the best approach."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Marty said fervently.

"Very well. I am a person located by birth five hundred years in the future. I make my living with a time machine. That is, I pick people up in any expired year and taxi them back to any year or month or day or moment that they choose. For this service they pay me meter rates. It's as simple as that."

Marty, dazed, nodded. "Of course. I'm just plain stupid. I should have known it all the time."

"As to my reading your thoughts and identifying you and your motives from your own mind—"

"Yeah—what about that?"

"It's quite a common practice in the future. Your children's children's children will learn the knack in school along with other subjects."

"Not mine. I don't expect to have any."

"I'm sure you'll find a way to persuade the little blonde lady."

"She's no lady. She's— now wait a minute—!"

"Im sorry. I'm afraid that could be classed as snooping. Would you like to know what I'm doing here in your day and age?"

"First things first," Marty said grimly. "What about this time taxi of yours? Have you got it parked outside at the curb?"

"Oh, no. It isn't the cumbersome vehicle you visualize. I have it right here in my desk." Six bent over and opened a drawer and brought out a bright metal case about the size of a small traveling bag. There were several dials on it and Marty counted three dials of varying size. Six looked up

apologetically and said, "This isn't the most expensive model on the market. It—well, it would correspond to a Chevrolet hardtop in comparison to a Cadillac convertible—the Cadillac being the most expensive model available."

"And you're trying to tell me that with that thing you can—"

"Precisely."

"Show me."

Six registered a troubled expression. "A trip into time is rather expensive. I don't suppose you'd be willing to pay me for—"

Marty grinned. The gimmick at last. He'd known there had to be one. "Absolutely not. I wouldn't cough up even a thin dime."

Six caressed the weird machine sadly. "I suppose that's quite natural and so long as your publicity might do me some good, a free ride is probably in order."

You had to give this guy credit for nerve, Marty thought. Then Six was asking, "To what particular place in elapsed time would you care to go?"

"How about unelapsed time?"

"That would be impossible. The passage of future time cannot be accelerated. Only the past is open to exploration

because the future does not yet exist."

"But you said you came out of the future."

"Out of what would be future to you but not to me because it is time that passed before I was born. Is that clear to you?"

"As clear as pea soup, but let it pass. How about taking me back to a certain ball game that was played—"

"—at Wrigley Field between the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs, in which Babe Ruth—"

"How in the hell did you know?"

"I peeked into your mind. But more than that—I've attended the game several times. People will debate on what happened there for several hundred years."

"Okay. Let's go."

As Marty smiled with a certain smug complacency, Fabian Six fiddled with the dials of the machine on his desk. Then—

There was a mighty roar. Marty looked around and found himself in a huge grandstand. Down on the ball field a stocky, spindle-legged figure walked cockily toward the plate. An even deeper roar of hatred went up but the Babe only grinned. He took his

stance at the plate. The ball streaked toward him. He swung futilely and the roar bellowed its delight. The performance was repeated and the stands went completely insane with ecstasy. Then the Babe turned and looked at the crowd after which he raised his hand in the direction of the center-field fence. The pitch came. The Babe swung. The ball went rifling out of the park. And—

Marty was back in the shabby office and Fabian Six was apologizing. "I'm sorry the trip was so brief. You see it's very expensive and my fuel supply—"

"I think they're all wrong," Marty mumbled in a daze.

"All wrong?"

"Uh-huh. The Babe held up two fingers, not one. I'm sure of it. He was indicating that he'd taken only two strikes, not that he was going to bust it over the center-field wall."

"As I said, the debate still goes on. Even those who go back and look can't be sure."

Marty jerked erect. "Wait a minute! You mean I was actually back there? This isn't some kind of hypnotism?"

"I don't know the first thing about hypnotism. In fact," Six added sadly, "I even have trouble repairing my machine when it goes out of order."

Marty sighed. "Okay. I'm sold. Now tell me what you're doing here."

"Looking for business, nothing more sinister than that, I assure you. There is quite a little competition up in my time. Other operators have more expensive machines. They are able to give their customers a less bumpy and faster ride. So I thought I'd come back to this year and try and pick up a few dollars."

"Have you had any customers?"

"Yes—and no."

"Which means—?"

"Three persons have applied for trips, but none of them have the necessary money."

"How much does it cost?"

"The rate is five hundred dollars per trip. If I cut it so much as a nickel I'd get into trouble with the Association and lose my license. You see, I must submit my meter for inspection once every three months."

"What about the free ride you gave me?"

"I think they'll allow that as promotion expense—that is if some business results."

Marty snapped his fingers indicating he'd made up his mind. "I tell you what you do. Get in touch with your three people. The *Blade* will foot the

bill. I'll go along and get myself a story."

"I'm afraid that would be two thousand dollars," Fabian Six said timidly. "I'd never get away with two free rides."

"All right—all right. Two thousand. When can we start?"

"I'll contact them immediately. I'm sure I can set it up for nine tomorrow morning."

"I'll be here."

"That will be fine. And thanks—thanks very much for the business."

Marty was a few minutes late the following morning. When he got to Fabian Six's office, the trio of passengers was already assembled. There were two elderly men and a lady of approximately the same age. Marty looked them over critically. The woman was thin, tall, and quiet-faced. Marty liked her instantly. The first of the two men was a great deal like Fabian Six: small, wispy, but with bright blue eyes and an upward turn at the corners of his mouth.

The third man was somewhat different. He was big, with slightly stooped shoulders and a tired look in his eyes. The flesh of his face was loose and hung in jowls against his thick neck.

Fabian Six, cheerful as a re-

sult of a nice piece of business, introduced Marty and said, "This is the gentleman I told you about. Our benefactor. He asks only that he be allowed to accompany you wherever you intend going. You have all, of course, agreed."

Marty saw the woman smile and he was sure she blushed. She said, "I'm Martha Hays. A widow. You are doing a very nice thing for all of us."

"I have good reason," Marty said.

The blue-eyed man was a Tom Duggan. He grinned and said, "It's okay by me if you tag along. Maybe you'll enjoy it."

But with the loose-fleshed John Saunders, it was again different. He eyed Marty morosely and said, "Come on along if you want to, but I'll tell you nothing. It's not part of the agreement that I do any talking."

"I guess you're right," Marty said. "Let's get going."

Marty was walking down a tree-bordered street in a small town. It was summer, a warm evening fragrance from roses and multicolored gardens around the big sprawling houses that had long-since gone out of style. Yellow lights gleamed warmly in

many windows and a big moon rode the sky.

Marty stopped in front of one of the houses. He entered through the gate and walked slowly around to the back-yard. There was a broad expanse of clipped turf and a circular lawn house ringed all around with rose bushes.

A girl stood by the entrance. She was tall and beautiful and honey-haired and there was something more—she was in love. Anyone with an ounce of perception could have seen the aura of love around her slim shoulders and the glow of it in her eyes.

As Marty watched, a young man approached from the other direction. He wore a uniform, a khaki outfit that seemed too tight and lacked the dash Marty had grown to associate with the uniforms furnished by the United States Army. Then he knew. Of course—World War I—almost forgotten by his generation. But there was a virility and a vibrance in the young man that no generation could ever forget,

He hurried to the girl and took her hands in his. He kissed her gently. When he drew back, his voice was husky. "We could ask him now," he said. "It still isn't too late. I don't leave until to-

morrow afternoon. We could be married tonight and—”

The girl melted again into his arms and then her answer came. “No—no, dear—I’m afraid. He needs more time. When the war is over and you come home—then maybe things will be different. Perhaps he will relent.”

“Whatever you say, sweetheart. I want what you want. But you can’t blame me for hoping a little for—oh, my darling! I love you.”

“But we do have this night. Most of it. They won’t be home until very late. We’ll be together here in the summer house—”

They went inside and Marty took two steps forward. Then he stopped and retraced his steps and left them alone . . .

The five of them sat again in the shabby little office. But something had changed, now. Martha Hays’ gentle face was transformed. Marty took out his notebook and waited, looking into her eyes. Her answering look was open and honest and there was a quiet smile on her lips. She said, “I owe you a great deal. You see, he never came back—and all through the years I’ve been haunted by the thought of how I failed him; failed him because I lacked courage. You gave me

the opportunity to change that—to some extent at least. That first night I failed him, well—completely. But knowing—realizing—I didn’t fail him the second time.” Her eyes pleaded. “You do understand, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Perhaps it was wrong, but I’ll be happier now.”

Marty put his notebook away with a frown. “Who feels like writing?” he grumbled.

Six touched a dial on the machine and . . .

Marty stood beside a desk in a busy office. Seated at the desk was a mousy little blue-eyed man with a natural up-curve at the corners of his mouth. Almost immediately another man in an outrageous high collar that Marty vaguely associated with a quartette singing *Sweet Adeline*, passed the desk saying, “Mr. Brenner wants to see you, Tom.”

Duggan got up and Marty followed him into a private office where a sour-mouthed man glowered at a notation on his desk. The man looked up at Duggan and his habitual scowl increased. “I see you’re asking for a raise, Duggan.”

“Yes, sir. I—”

“How long have you been with us?”

"Nine years now."

"Do you think you've earned a raise?"

"I do, sir."

There was a cat-mouse look behind Mr. Brenner's eyes. Marty could see that he was enjoying himself. He said, "Well I don't, Duggan. In fact I've been debating keeping you on and this impertinent demand helps me make up my mind."

"I don't get the raise, sir?"

"More than that—you're fired. As of now."

Duggan moved close to the desk. "Would you mind standing up, sir?"

Brenner, somewhat bewildered, got to his feet by way of reaction.

Splat!

Tom Duggan's fist shot out and connected with Brenner's mouth with the sound of a meat ax connecting with a side of beef. Marty was astonished at the power in the little man's right arm. Duggan backed away as Brenner flopped into his chair and brought a flapping hand to his mouth. Duggan said, "Thank you very much, sir. I hope I broke your plate. And by the way—I quit . . ."

Tom Duggan sat laughing in the dusty office of Fabian Six. "For thirty years I've

wanted to do that. Didn't have the guts when it happened the first time. Let him fire me and crawled away like a worm. Now the sight of Brenner's face will cheer my later years and that's for sure."

"Can't we get on with it now?" Six asked. "There's a very narrow margin of profit in—"

"Something just occurred to me," Marty said. "Can I stop off somewhere on the next trip?"

"Really now, Mr. Pennington. I—"

"It won't take long."

Fabian Six pondered. "Well, if you must you must. I'll drop you off there, but make it quick, please. You've no idea how this machine eats up fuel."

Marty turned to Saunders. "Are you quite sure you're ready?"

"I'm ready," Saunders said, dully . . .

Marty was standing in the driveway beside a house not unlike the one Martha Hays had lived in, though possibly somewhat larger. After a few moments, he heard loud talking inside but could distinguish no words. Then the front door opened and a woman came out. She was crying into a handkerchief. She

walked to the gate and moved off down the street.

Soon Marty heard a sound behind him in the drive. He turned to see a carriage and a span of horses coming toward him. A younger Saunders held the reins; big and grim of face but with no flesh hanging in loose folds.

Marty got in beside him and the span turned in the direction the woman had gone. Two blocks on down the street, another carriage waited and the woman got into it and talked for some minutes with the man driving it.

Finally they pulled away and Saunders' carriage fell in behind them. The drive seemed a long one with the country through which they moved getting rougher with each passing mile. The forward carriage stopped in a particularly rough section of terrain and Saunders pulled up also.

The man and woman got out of their carriage and began walking. Saunders and Marty followed. Then by the light of a full moon, Marty saw that they had come to the edge of a lake and stood on a high bluff overlooking it. But not a lake exactly, he thought. Then he knew—a water-filled gravel pit.

The man and woman talked

briefly. She seemed to be pleading. Then he struck her savagely and as she sagged to the ground he caught her up and threw her over the bluff into the pit below....

Marty stared at Saunders across the small office. "Was that you? Were you following yourself to that gravel pit, Mr. Saunders?"

Saunders' eyes were like two coals long-since burned out. The flesh of his face sagged even lower. "I'll answer none of your questions. That was the arranged agreement."

Martha Hays and Tom Duggan had already left and only Fabian Six and Saunders remained in the office with Marty. Six said, "Now I trust the journeys were satisfactory for all concerned and that—"

"I think that was it," Marty said, his eyes still on Saunders. "But I can't understand why you would want to go back and watch yourself commit a murder."

Saunders arose, his face a mask of suffering. "Let me alone! Let me alone, will you? I've had enough!"

He rushed from the office slamming the door behind him. Fabian Six looked at Marty in surprise. "I guess

things didn't go well with him. He—"

The sound of a shot cut Six off. Marty jumped to his feet and ran to the office door. He threw it open. Saunders lay in the hallway a gun just falling from his hand.

"Good heavens! He's shot himself!" Six blurted.

"Come on! Get him back inside. There'll be people wondering about that shot."

They carried Saunders back in and laid him on the floor. It wasn't easy with so big a man. Then Marty bent to examine the wound and Saunders opened his eyes.

"Bad," Marty said.

"It wasn't me," Saunders said, apparently talking more to himself than Marty. "Clara—my wife. I drove her out. She disappeared the same night and everyone said she ran away but I was never sure. I always wondered. Now I know. He took her out and murdered her. That pit was deep. The body was never found. Now I know. I killed her."

"I'm sorry Mr. Saunders. I didn't understand. It wasn't you. Whoever this man was—"

"I killed her. Now I know. The fear has haunted me all these years."

"Don't talk like that. You didn't kill her."

But Saunders was dead.

Fabian Six was deeply disturbed. "This is the most unfortunate thing that ever happened to me. Really the most unfortunate. I guess I'll just have to change locations."

"I think that would be a good idea. But you'll leave a big puzzle behind you."

"How so?"

"Well, your name on the door for one thing."

"That will go with me. I brought everything with me so to speak. Even including this office."

"You mean Saunders' body won't be found?"

"Not until tomorrow, I'm afraid. In a way, today doesn't really exist for any of us." Marty's face was a large question mark and Six went on. "Let me explain it to you."

"Not to me, brother. I know all I want to about—"

"Then I suggest you go on about your business just as though nothing had happened. In a certain sense, nothing did."

"So long, chum," Marty said. "Maybe we'll meet again in some year or other."

"I hope my service was satisfactory."

"It was terrific." And Marty went out the door.

Marty entered Classified and closed the door after him. He locked the door and crossed to where Sally Hays sat at her desk. He said, "On your feet, Miss Legs."

"Marty—what on earth—"

"We're through playing games."

"Games?"

He put his hand on her shoulders and drew her close.

"That's what I said — games. From now on, nothing but the truth."

"Are you implying—?"

"I'm not implying — I'm stating—that there never was a Joe — no Aunt Helen — no rose-covered arbor. You didn't even live in Arapahoe. You lived in a town twenty miles west of there."

"That's absurd. Why would I dream up a story like that?"

"To keep me at arm's length, baby. Because you know that once you let go and really kiss me, you'll be lost." He drew Sally into his arms and kissed her. After a while, he allowed her to breathe.

"Lost," she moaned, "completely lost. Oh, Marty. I didn't want to get married. I was afraid — I — oh, I don't know! Just kiss me again."

After a while, Marty said, "And now, about those kids."

"Let's get started as soon as possible," Sally said dreamily. "But Marty — how did you know I was — fibbing?"

"I took a ride in a time machine and stopped off to check."

"Oh, you fool. Shut up and kiss me."

They'll believe anything except the truth.

THE END



THE REVOLVING FAN



SINCE the past issue went to press, I have received 21 fanzines. With this issue, I'm trying an experiment: I shall review every one of them—some at length, and the rest, for reasons of limited space, hitting the highlights. As a result, I shall have to forego my introductory remarks. Just keep the 'zines rolling in. And now—away we go

INSIDE & SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER. #9. May, '55. 510 West 113th St., Room 407, New York 25, N. Y. 25¢. 5/\$1. 45 pp.

One of the best 'zines received this month, INSIDE starts off with a Think piece by editor Ron Smith on censorship. Pointing out the ambivalence which censors demonstrate, Smith says many things which have been said before, but with a forcefulness and logic which is impressive. Next in line is a beautiful, unusual feature called, "The Story of the Future." Here, in the drawings of Neil Austin, Morris Scott Dollens, Jon Arfstrom, Naaman Peterson, and Jack Gaugan, accompanied by some semi-poetic (no author given) is a powerful commentary on our age and our possible future. I suggest to prozine editors in search of artistic talents that the five are certainly worthy of consideration. "A Bloody Fight" by William L. Freeman laments the passing of FANTASTIC's greatest days. Since Howard Browne will probably answer Freeman, I'll leave it at that. Mark Clifton answers IMAGINATION's editor, Bill Hamling, in "But They Want To Write Them," a commentary on science fiction by one of its best logicians. Jon Hartt's article, "The Hack Prolific" is an evalua-

tion of Arthur J. Burks, and as good a hatchet job as I've seen recently. Harlan Ellison's story, "Hardcover," a Bradburian tale of future schools, delinquents, and books is one of the best this uneven writer has had published. Well illustrated, full of interesting advertisements, INSIDE takes top rating this issue.

* * *

CANFAN. #24; March, '55. Gerald A. Steward, 166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto 10, Ontario, Canada. 15¢; 8/\$1. 19 pp.

Lucid in form as well as in content, CANFAN, now in its 12th year of publication, is the voice of Canadian fandom. Dean A. Grennell's leadoff article is a comparison of "Unknown Worlds" and "Beyond." Conclusion: nothing can ever take the place of "Unknown." Harlan Ellison writes a furious defense of his story "Swamp Dust," an attack on which (by Howard Lyons) appeared in CANFAN #23. Lyons replies with a cool rebuttal. George O. Smith discusses the problems of interplanetary communication, in one of his best articles. A review of Moskowitz' "Immortal Storm," S. H. M.'s reminiscences of past squabbles between John W. Campbell, Jr., Moskowitz, and John Chapman Miske, and Don Ford's plug for organization in the selection of Convention sites fill the rest of the 19 pages. A good effort.

* * *

OBLIQUE. #2. April '55. Clifford A. Gould, 1559 Cable St., San Diego 7, Calif. 10¢; 6/50¢. 26 pp.

OBLIQUE and its editor don't take themselves seriously, resulting in both advantages and disadvantages. Plus: easy to read and often chucklesome. Minus: Inclusion of some nonsense, some "So What?" bits. I enjoyed "More Than You-Man" by the editor, a satirical discussion of the neo-fan written in the style of Sturgeon, but Larry Walker's effort, and "Bourne Into Fandom" left me cold, despite the value of the latter author's blast at foolishness in the realm of the fan. Best of the issue is Fred Malz' article on himself—a light-hearted, unpretentious handling of the author's ideas, efforts and misadventures. Letters column more than usually interesting—why not? Contributions from Walt Willis, Don Weagars, Bob Bloch, Richard Geis, et al.

IT. Vol. I, #5. Spring, '55. Walter W. Lee, Jr., 1205 S. 10th St., Coos Bay, Oregon. 25¢. 54 pp.

Thirty-three pages of this well-dittoed effort are devoted to a much needed Checklist of s-f, fantasy, and horror films. Mr. Lee has done some notable work, and every fan should try to get this issue. The remaining 21 pages contain some interesting stories and poems, much of which is from Cal Tech's literary magazine PENDULUM. Gordon Woodcock's article, "Rocket Fuels For Space Stations" is a fascinating glimpse into the future. A page of s-f news, Walt Lee's reviews of two books on flying saucers, and a column of letters wind up this well-illustrated, legible, and interesting fanzine. IT has it.

* * *

NITE CRY. Vol. II, #3. Oklahoma Science Fiction Confederation, 5921 E. 4th Pl., Tulsa, Okla. 10¢; 6/50¢. 33 pp.

Leadoff is a so-so story, "Eden" by Victor Paananen and Warren F. Link, followed by Dan McPhail's department of reminiscences and reviews of s-f promags, fanzines, and fans of the '30s. Aga Yonder is represented by two poems, and Larry Walker does a perceptive column of book reviews. Shirley Ray's story, "The Fossil," is another tale of a Thing From The Black Tar Pit, while Claude R. Hall rambles on in some offbeat notes. Fanzine reviews; letters. This 'zine could use more spirit and zest.

* * *

PEON. Vol. VIII, #2. May, '55. Charles Lee Riddle, PNCA, USN. 108 Dunham St., Norwich, Conn. 20¢; 6/\$1. 38 pp.

Chief Riddle is my idea of what a fanned should be—literate, thoughtful, deeply interested in the field, but with an eye's twinkle withal. Mimeo work is the best I've seen, and contents both risible and rational. From its cover by Emsh, this seventh Annish (Anniversary Issue to those unfamiliar with Fancant) contains topnotch stories by Harlan Ellison and Dave Mason, a thought-provoking (even if you cock a quizzical eyebrow) autobiographical fragment by Rog Phillips, a fine description and review of "The Jet-Propelled Couch" from Dr. Robert Lindner's book, "The Fifty Minute Hour," the reviewer being T. E. Watkins; Fantastuff by Terry Carr; a defense of Isaac Asimov by Henry Moskowitz; a Credo For Fantasy Writers by

Robert Bloch (I laughed myself into gasps with this one); reviews of sundry fanzines by the editor; a thoughtful *hic jacet* on the death of Dick Clarkson by Jim Harmon; a slashing defense of PLANET by choleric Eric Fennel; and sundry notes by the editor.

* * *

PSYCHOTIC. #19. *March-April, '55. Richard E. Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland, Oregon.* 20¢. 29 pp.

There's enough spirit in this issue to spare a bit for NITE CRY, but it's a far haul from Portland to Tulsa. The editor's "The Leather Couch" announces that PSYCHOTIC will henceforth be known as SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW, will publish no fan fiction, and will embody new bookkeeping principles. My reaction: sounds good, but I hope Geis doesn't go staid on us with SFR. Robert Bloch does a clever satire on a "Non-Lewis Carol"; Vernon McCain's "Padded Cell" is, as always, full of individual notes, quotes, and a discussion of Fandom As A Way Of Life. Bob Silverbeg explains why he quit publishing SPACESHIP, and there's a good column of letters from fen. Illustrations, as always, tops.

* * *

EISFA. Vol. III, #3. *April '55. R. and J. Coulson, 626 Court St., Huntington, Ind.* 5¢. 50¢ annually. 19 pp.

The Indiana fans (see MERLIN and ISFA below) are one of the most active groups in America. This official publication of the Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association has a bit of everything for everyone, including a department of Chuck Spidell's drawings. A bit naive, but far better than the sciolisms of the pseudo-sophisticates, EISFA does a good job for its members.

* * *

SINISTERRA. Vol. II, #3. *Winter, '54. The Nameless Ones, Box 92, 920 Third Ave., Seattle 4, Wash.* 25¢. 43 pp.

Devoted to a satirical japerie on some of s-f's sacrosanct themes, SINISTERRA gets off to a good start with Burnett R. Toskey's "From The Frying Pan," a witty, though over-long, Mad Scientist story to end all Mad Scientist stories. Then there's the I. Asimov thing again, followed by G. M. Carr's

"Paradise Eternal," a story whose idea, though fresh and vivid, is amateurishly handled. Rose Stark is represented by a charming vignette of caveman life, "Adam & Eve And Pinch Me." Both F. M. Busby and Fred Malz pick up axes, auger bits, blow torches and crowbars as they demolish some of s-f's sacred cows in "Sucker Question" and "The King Beckons" respectively; and although I've sworn not to review another Con report, Julia Woodard's is neighborly and well illustrated with photos. The last page of pseudo-advertisements is in keeping with the hilarious tone of the rest of the 'zine.

* * *

MERLIN. Vol. IV, #8. April '55. Lee Ann Tremper, 1022 N. Tuxedo St., Indianapolis, Ind. 5¢; 12/50¢. 23 pp.

All three of the Indiana publications benefit from the efforts of the same small group of devotees: Miss Tremper, the Coulsons, Dave Jenrette, J. T. Crackell. The 'zine review column, "The Kettle" is outstanding. Well illustrated, light in tone, this issue has nothing but entertainment to recommend it—and that's enough.

* * *

ISFA. Vol. II, #1. Edward McNulty, 5645 N. Winthrop St., Indianapolis, Ind. 20¢ Annish; otherwise 15¢. 75¢ annually. 52 pp.

This Annish contains stories and articles ranging from so-so to excellent, the usual departments, histories of the Indiana fan organizations and their publications, and an art folio by Chuck Speidel, Jack Harness, and Bill Nelson. If you'd like to have a clearer idea of what's cooking Indiana way, get this issue.

* * *

SIDEREAL. #2. Cheltenham S-F Circle, 44 Barbridge Rd., Hesters Way, Cheltenham, Glos., England. U. S. Representative: Ron Ellik, 277 Pomona Ave., Long Beach 3, Calif. 10¢. 33 pp.

Don't let the light-hearted attack of SIDEREAL fool you; there's much protein under the glace. Articles are especially good, covering everything from teleportation to movies. More akin to our tastes than you'd think with 3,000 miles of water between us.

CAMBER. #4. Stanstead Rd., Hoddesdon, Herts, England. 15¢.
40 pp.

Like the two efforts already mentioned, this 'zine proves that the British think it good form not to take too seriously something they feel deeply about. Some outrageous humor in this issue, but it was Terry Jeeves' "The Solar System" that had me laughing until I fell out of my straitjacket.

* * *

OPERATION FANTAST. Vol. II, #5. March '55. Capt. K. F. Slater,
22 Broad St., Syston, Leics., England. 4/\$1. 23 pp.

Adult, cool and rational, this issue had only one fault for me: the grim short story by Barrington J. Bayley. Mainly devoted to reviews of books and films, this issue was accompanied by a catalogue of the latest British s-f and fantasy books. You'll find both interesting.

* * *

ACTIFAN. #2. April, '55. Maurice Lubin, 14 Jones St.,
Worcester, Mass. 6/50¢. 27 pp.

A small but ambitious 'zine. Obviously put out by youngsters, it has the faults of that gen, but also the advantages . . . i.e., is naive, eager, anxious to be doing something, even though its ideas of what needs doing are somewhat hazy. Worth keeping an eye on.

* * *

STF-IN-GEN. Vol. I, #1. Summer, '55. Jerry DeMuth, 3223
Ernst St., Franklin Park, Illinois. 20¢. 28 pp.

A mimeo effort also put out by S-F Fen (j. g.). Contents mainly by two writers, Editor DeMuth and Joe Gibson. By and large, the articles are better than the short stories. Ego-bo, but not blatantly so. However, overpriced at 20¢.

* * *

TRIODE. #3. Eric Bentcliffe, 47 Alldis St., Greatmoor, Stockport, Ches., England. U. S.: Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis, Minn. 10¢. 40 pp.

Even more mad than the previously cited British effort, TRIODE also has sense as well as nonsense. Especially interesting to U. S. readers, I think, is its reprint of Alfred Bester's

comparison of U. S. and British science fiction. Conclusion: Alfie can straddle a fence with the best of 'em.

* * *

COUP. #2. *The Coup Group*, 14 Jones St., New York, N. Y.
25¢ 6/\$1.50. 40 pp.

Riding off madly in all directions, this group of fans goes a bit wild-eyed at times, but many of their ruminations make sense. Highlights: Evan Cain's "Future Indefinite," discussing the chauvinistic background of most American s-f; and a translated Soviet s-f story, "The Wages of Crime," which is poor stuff, but an interesting glimpse of (as they would put it) Sovscific.

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES. Vol. X. #219-220-221-222. *Fandom House*,
P. O. Box #2331, Patterson 23, N. J. 10¢; 12/\$1. 6 to 8 pp.

What more is there to say about this informative, factual, interesting newsletter, oldest of its kind? Packed, as usual, with news of pros, fans, fiction, et al, it is to fandom what "Variety" is to show biz. A must.

* * *

FRONTIER #2. April, '55. *The Society For the Advancement of Space Travel*, Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis 22, Minn. 12 pp.

The second issue of a society devoted to serious aims, and one in which every devoted fan should be interested. Articles are both informative and conjectural, mainly, at this stage, concerned with reports of what's going on in the society and in the scene-at-large. Subscription to members, but they'll probably send you a copy if you show interest.

* * *

ECLIPSE. Vol II, #1 (?) Ray Thompson (?), 410 S. Fourth St. (?), Norfolk (?), Neb. (?). 10¢ (?) 6/50¢ (?) 24 pp.

The issue I got was so badly mimeoed that I couldn't make head or tale out of it. By squinting, I can see that the editor gets compulsively oral when near a Gestetner, and rambles on and on and on and on . . . but you can't prove it by me. For me, the Eclipse was total.



by VILLIERS GERSON

A SHORT merci is in order to start off this issue's reviews —a thank you to the publishing houses which have had so much to do with the growth of science fiction. Did you know that only four publishers put out 50%-60% of each year's books? Uh-huh. From Ballantine Books, Gnome Press, Doubleday, and Fantasy Press come the novels and anthologies we wait for—30 to 40 out of perhaps 65 a year. This is not to discount the efforts of such houses as Crown, Putnam, Winston, Rinehart, et al, but the four already mentioned deserve an especial vote of thanks from all of us. The best thanks, of course, are sales—and so by buying s-f books, you express your appreciation to Ballantine and its Bernard Shir-Cliff; to Martin Greenberg of Gnome; to Lloyd Eshbach of Fantasy Press; and to Walter Bradbury of Doubleday.

STAR BRIDGE. By Jack Williamson and James E. Gunn. 221 pp.
Gnome Press. \$3.00

The authors invite you to come with them to meet Alan Horn, reckless soldier-of-fortune in the Eron Dynasty, 1500 years in the future. The Dynasty, whose control of the Galaxy is due to its monopoly of faster-than-light transportation, is decadent. A small shove can accelerate its fall—and the shove is administered by Horn. He is joined in his efforts by two strange beings whom he neither likes nor trusts: one, a wizened Chinese named Wu, who claims to be over 1500 years old; the other, a frowzy parrot which is actually a pseudomorph, a living diamond which can change to any shape it

desires. Assisted by the two, Horn finds himself forced into a course of action which embraces everything from abduction to assassination, but which ultimately wins him a beautiful young Empress as a bride, and a position of power in the only democratic worlds of the star cluster.

Although the authors have an unfortunate tendency to overwrite, and their chapter headings, called "The History" are overly pretentious, still the pace and shock value of this fast-moving blood-and-thunder novel will find many enthusiasts among s-f fans.

THE MARTIAN WAY. By Isaac Asimov. 222 pp. Doubleday & Co. \$2.95

Isaac Asimov is one of science fiction's better novelists. Such works as his "I, Robot," his "Caves of Steel," and his Foundation series have amply proved this point. But in this collection of four novelettes, he reveals his Achilles' heel.

We must except the first, and title, story, "The Martian Way." Here, a group of colonists on Mars are faced with extinction unless they can get water. Without water for rocket mass, their spaceships cannot roam the spaceways. Yet Earth, the prime source of supply, is under the influence of a demagogue named Hilder, whose platform of "Earth's water for Terrans" means ruin for the colonists. The Martians (and the author) find the answer in space, among the rings of Saturn. A less adept writer would have brought in some *deus ex machina*, but Dr. Asimov's deft narration of difficulties met and overcome, his sympathetic handling of character, and his adroit plot twists give this story the interest, the warm and dexterous humanity we have come to expect of him.

The other three stories are quite another matter. "Youth," in which two youngsters capture the first interstellar visitors, is spoiled, despite the unexpected twist, by the author's visualization of the youngsters. The same is true of "Sucker Bait," whose main protagonist is an adolescent mnemonist accompanying an exploring party on a star planet which has taken the lives of Terran colonists. We are exasperated and confused by the whining, wheedling egocentricities of the protagonists in both these stories; moreover, the author's incomplete investigation of their qualities slows down the action. In "The Deep," the remaining tale, a group of extraterrestrials plot to

invade Earth, a scheme whose success depends on a human baby. It left me cold.

Dr. Asimov's young—be they children or adolescents—are more than normally infantile, and far too exasperating. It would be wise for the author to stick to the adult characters with whom he is at home, and who, fortunately, add to instead of distracting and detracting from the story.

RE-BIRTH. *By John Wyndham.* 185 pp. Ballantine Books. Cloth: \$2.00; Paper: 35¢

Here is the strange world which has followed the last Atomic war—a world in which radiation has cruelly misused genetics. Here, on what was once Labrador, is the farming community of Waknuk, surrounded by the strange Fringes, in which lurk the mutants, both animal and human, whose physical anomalies have caused them to be banished from their former kin. In this community, David Strorm, his cousin Rosalind, and his sister Petra grow up. The elder Strorm is a man of power in Waknuk, terrible in his rigid determination to weed out any mutation, as has been commanded by the unrelenting code which enables the community to survive. If the mutant be plant or animal, it is destroyed. If human, it is sterilized, and banished to the Fringes. And then comes the discovery that David, Rosalind, and Petra are a newer and more deadly mutation—deviants who possess true telepathy.

Good science fiction writes slowly, and reads fast. It writes slowly because a gifted author such as Mr. Wyndham develops his people and their surroundings with magnificent unity—with thought, and time, and effort. We become intensely interested in our harried protagonists; we follow their flight and its triumphant conclusion with distress and devotion, with an absorption which makes this novel hard to lay down. The author has evoked not only a fully rounded and believable world; he has also evoked an emotional structure, a mood which makes this his best book to date. Highly recommended.

BEYOND EDEN. *By David Duncan.* 169 pp. Ballantine Books. Cloth: \$2.00; Paper: 35¢

Heretofore Mr. Duncan's talents have been employed in the field of the suspense novel, and it is only within recent years

that he has embarked upon science fiction. But the lessons he has learned in the field of suspense stand him in good stead with this, his most recent and decidedly best novel.

Baldly, this is a novel of the near future, laid in California's Imperial Valley in 1961. The cold war has been resolved, and all over the world Man is expanding his powers. Dr. Henry Gallatin heads a government project which is to take water from the sea, divest it of its salts and impurities through atomic condensation, and turn it into the Valley, there to transform a desert into a garden. But in the process, something new turns up, a living force which acts so strangely upon all living things as to warrant an investigation. The government committee which conducts the investigation is headed by a Senator Bannerman, Gallatin's avowed foe. When Gallatin and his assistant, Madeline Angus, discover that the force which has had such disturbing results is a strange living water, and perhaps the source of all life, Bannerman tries to sabotage their work, and to destroy their reputations. But the living water changes the plans and destinies of all the actors—leading to a conclusion which, as all good conclusions should, goes on beyond the ending of the book.

An engrossing story, imbued with more philosophic speculation regarding the nature of Man, life, and existence than one usually finds in a s-f novel, simply and yet beautifully written, this book decidedly warrants your investigation and interest.

POINT ULTIMATE. By Jerry Sohl. 244 pp. Rhinehart & Co. \$2.75

In 1969 the Communists conquered America, not so much by atomic warfare, as by the use of a plague. Millions died before the Communists came with their serum to save the living from death, for a slower but more deadly fate as slaves. Now, in the last year of the 20th century, every American must report to his Communist overlords for the monthly injection which can rescue him from the plague. But this means that the American must repay his captors with unquestioning obedience.

Young Emmet Keyes, however, finds himself immune to the pandemic, and sets out to contact the rumored underground in which he can fight the communists and their Quislings. Although captured, he wins release with the aid of new-found

allies, and wins the gypsy girl who has brought him love.

This is Mr. Sohl's worst book. His characters are flat, unidimensional, and devoid of humanity. His situations are banal. He writes long passages of propaganda which administer the *coup de grace* to an already faltering structure. Pro-democratic propaganda is important, of course, but used as blatantly as in this book, in which its characters spout pages of inept defiance, such propaganda defeats its own worthy aims.

ADDRESS: CENTAURI. By F. L. Wallace. 220 pp. Gnome Press.

\$3.00

In the future age of Earth, few men die of accidents. Such has been the progress in repair and plastic surgery, in preventive medicine, in glandular and psychosomatic research, that if a spark of life remains it can be saved—at a cost. The cost to Docchi, an engineer who fell into a corrosive solution of cold light, was his arms, his normality, and the doubtful blessing of being able to light up like a firefly when emotionally disturbed. To Jordan, it was the loss of his lower torso and legs. To Anti, bloated with Venusian fungi, it was the necessity of living in an acid bath which continually ate away her constantly growing flesh. And to Nona, a beautiful girl who was born without the power of speech or communication, but with a strange ability to sense and affect machines, it was exile to an asteroid. The beautiful normals of Earth dislike looking at these accidentals and deficient: exile is their lot.

Tired of their aesthetic imprisonment, impelled by a desire to prove themselves of value, the four, led by Docchi, transform their asteroid into a starship and set off for the planets of the Centauri system, bearing with them a captive, Dr. Cameron. There, despite the harrying of pursuing Earthmen, they make peace not only with their more normal fellows, but with the Centaurians themselves.

Although aptly plotted, Mr. Wallace's tale has a serious defect: his characters do not react to each other, nor can we react to them. He has steered a course of under-writing too close to Scylla. The result is a loss of affect, of emotion, and thus, of reader identification. Devoid of emotion in what would be an emotion-laden atmosphere, even the love stories of Nona and Dr. Cameron, of Docchi and another disabled girl, and even their eventual victory fails to involve the reader.



...OR SO YOU SAY

BY THE READERS

Dear Mr. Browne:

. . . been reading *Amazing* for six years . . . first letter, etc.

I buy science-fiction magazines. All of them, with the exception of two or three strictly juvenile, space-operatic, pulps. I read them once, then throw them away. I believe that I'm an average stf fan; non-fanatical, just happening to like to read the stuff. *Science-fiction*, that is.

When the new notebook-sized *Amazing* came out, you had something. You now have the remnants of something. The glossy paper and the ultra-shiny covers died out. So what? We still received 130 pages, or so, of science-fiction for our 35 cents. We now receive 108 pages. Approximately one-sixth of the magazine has been devoted to various and sundry columns (May '55 issue). If you cut out these columns, you could sell *Amazing* for 29 cents. Perhaps you could even charge thirty cents, and restore shiny paper, inside and out. I would much rather prefer to keep on paying 35 cents, and get an extra novelette in these 22 pages.

Is *Amazing* the, "world's leading science-fiction magazine"? What is this statement based on? So much for criticism.

Keep up the high caliber space opera. As long as it's in there, I'll even pay for the columns. Enjoyed the May issue very much, with the exception of, "The Cosmic Frame." It just didn't impress me. I wonder if you could put me in touch with a science-fiction reader, who also happens to be a photographer? I have never met one of these strange creatures, outside of myself.

In closing, it strikes me as strange, writing a letter to a letter column, of which I do not approve. But, I suppose, that I can submit to it, as long as it's there.

Ken Rose
3820 W. Jefferson
Ecorse 29, Michigan

- *Are we overdoing a good thing? Are we devoting too much space to letters and other departments? So far, the reader response says we've hit about the right ratio of story space and department space. If you don't agree, scream; if you do agree, say so. It's the only way we have of knowing.*

—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

First of all, I'm not going to rate your stories. Some I liked, others I didn't, but in general I feel your stories are more than averagely good.

I like to read your departments, but I do complain that you had more fiction before you put them all back in. And since I am only an ordinary reader, not an active fan, I like the fiction best. In fact, that's what I buy the mag for! So I was a little disappointed to find four stories and five features (including the page of cartoons in your latest issue.)

Speaking of cartoons, I love them! They really add something to a magazine. I only wish more of the sf magazines would use more cartoons. (That sentence structure was deliberate!)

Your editorial was very interesting to me, as I've been keeping up on the two controversies you mentioned, and I was wondering how other people felt about them. Now I know. Thank you. Mr. De Soto expressed my feelings about stf and fanzines very well. I've never seen a fanzine, as the only one I ever ordered was never sent me. That was two years ago. (Other people must have received their copies, though, as that particular fanzine has been in existence for well over three years.

I too, prefer plain and simple covers. The only prozine I save every issue is ASF. The others, though they don't embarrass me as most of my friends are Stfen, do seem usually lacking in good taste. Of course, that's merely my opinion. Your covers I like pretty well, and when we can move ourselves,

three kids, and a cat out of our 27 foot trailer, I most probably will start saving *Amazing*. I notice that lots of the better Stf magazines are showing more good taste in their covers. You, for instance, Astounding and Galaxy for two others.

In answer to one of your letters in this last issue. Please keep on with the good stories, and don't sacrifice them for your departments. As I said before, I'm just an ordinary reader. Let the so-called Acti-fan read his fanzines if he wants. I, like so many other readers, buy Science Fiction Magazines for the Science Fiction in them.

Well, considering that this is the first letter-to-the-editor, I've ever written in all my 22 years, I think I've let off a goodly amount of steam. I do enjoy your magazine, honest!

P. A. Clark
University of Alaska
College, Alaska

• *Our reply to Ken Rose's letter fits yours as well, Mr. Clark. . . . As for not receiving fanzines, your remark to that effect should bring you several. Let us know what you think of them.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

I have been prompted to write some comments made by Roger De Soto, in the fmz review department in the July *Amazing*; the ones concerning the motivations of certain faneds and the, so called "function" of the fan.

Mr. De Soto would have it that "Egoboo Is The Root of All Evil." And if it were to be disposed of the world of both fan and pro would be a very happy one. He also intimates that the True Duty of the fan is to support the pro field through Serious Constructive activity.

Pray tell, Roger, what would you have we fen do; stand on street corners hawking promags, or perhaps we should get together and raise a fund for the less fortunate of the pro editors. Both of these would indeed be constructive activities—really do something for Good Ole' SF.

What is it that induces seemingly sane people into pubbing a fanzine; certainly not the hope of monetary gain? I don't think that you could name two fanzines that break even let alone show a profit; the urge of self-expression?—I hardly think so,

there are *many* other fields through which self-expression could be achieved, without nearly so much expense and, indeed, more recognition; the urge to ". . . do something constructive . . ."?, as I pointed out previously this could be achieved through a multitude of other activities; or perhaps the possibility of world wide fame and renown—maybe even a Pulitzer Prize is the real motivation.

I think that you'll agree that, in truth, the reason is not any one of these, in itself, but a little bit of each one mixed with a goodly portion of a craving for Egoboo (which is very like a drug as the more you get the more you need) and then mixed with a totally unknown ingredient that makes a fan—a fan. Well I seem to have gone in a big circle expounding on much and saying little, however, I do want to state one thing, whatever it is that motivates a fan it most definitely is *not* the desire to do something constructive and/or serious, whether it be right or not, that is the way it goes.

Just one more thing about Mr. De Soto's closing comment: "Do something constructive . . . be a fan." He neglected to state what he considered a constructive activity to be, and it seems that the way he would have it is that we fan should really step in and give the pros a hand.

I may have been a little harsh in my estimate of Mr. De Soto's viewpoint but then I'm a fan, and that is something far from a rational, conservative, serious, *constructive* being.

Clifford Gould
1559 Cable St.
San Diego 7, Calif.

• *Perhaps Mr. De Soto will answer your letter direct, Clifford. . . . All we know is, the way of the dyed-in-the-wool fan is a strange and wondrous thing, understood completely only by others of the species—and science-fiction would be poorer for not having them.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

I just about lost interest in you and your publications since the time in Chicago when I heard you tell what your policies for the future were going to be. That was in 1952, remember? There the fans greeted your plans and ideas rather coldly—or maybe it was rather warmly, since they got a bit hot under

the collars. From time to time I checked into *Fantastic* and *Amazing* and left hurriedly. Now the situation has changed.

I read thru your current July 1955 issue and enjoyed every bit of it. Your editorial, commenting on the Bott-Hamling-Asimov-Moskowitz fiascos, was very interesting. I also liked your authors' biographies, even when they were about some obviously house names such as *Lee Francis* (a pen name that Leroy Yerxa and Howard Browne use, among others).

Mark Guthrie's story had a lot of action in it and I loved it. I can tell when I'm really getting into these stories. With "These Bones For Hire" I kept counting ahead the number of pages left to read and sympathizing with the characters and realizing how much trouble and stuff they had yet to face.

"But The Planet Died" was pretty good, but I guess I liked it because it reminded me a little of Emmett McDowell's "The Wandering Egos" back in April '48 *Amazing*. There was a story worth anthologizing.

The "Man Who Talked To Bees" and "Be My Guest!" were what I'd call OK, nothing more.

All in all, a great change and the beginning of a new era in science fiction—the day when science fiction editors realize that fandom is a statistically large enough group to merit heeding if not considering.

David Jenrette
Box 7161
Pope AFB, N. C.

• *Fandom hasn't always greeted our idea with cheers, Dave; but at least they were ideas! . . . Glad you liked Guthrie's work; he'll be back. We're turning more and more to new writers; we are forced to because some of the old-timers simply can't adjust to the revolution in readers' tastes.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Surely you as editor of the "World's Oldest Science-Fiction Magazine" (to more correctly put that banner on the cover) must be getting a little sick and tired of all this gloom about the great science fiction depression? Of what purpose to continually scream that science fiction has missed the "big-time"? Where do we go from here?

Amazing Stories has survived many a crisis from that first . . . OR SO YOU SAY

April, 1926 to date, surely it can last through this one. But not with the brand of fiction present in the July issue. Perhaps it was an off issue, even Gernsback, Sloane and Palmer had them. Dull stories are not the monopoly of *Amazing Stories* or even the science fiction magazines these days.

It is good to see some features back in the magazine. In my case I did not regret the 35¢ since both you and Villiers Gerson seemed to have something to say and you did it fairly well. I liked your comments about the pulp size not selling. At any rate it is truthful to say that pulp size magazines got very little display but I doubt whether the present digest size is any great shakes. It is too bad that your plans of 1950-51 of going large size ala Blue Book never were carried out. It certainly would be a novelty in the field. Don't mention *Science Fiction Plus* as a sad example; just remember when and how it was published. There is something about the digest size that seems to squeeze the life and personality right out of the science fiction magazines. I can't say that anyone of them that changed to it has benefited to any great extent (and I include *Astounding Science Fiction* and its decade plus in the digest size in that statement.) In many cases you could rip the covers off a dozen different science fiction magazines and you couldn't tell one from another. Talk about your lack of personality! After reading science fiction all these years I've come to the conclusion that personality, even bad personality is more desirable in the science fiction magazines than this high level mediocrity that has swamped the field. I'm sincerely interested in where you are going to get the good stories. It'll be a good trick if you can do it. You mentioned, "but the standard of stories is going to continue to be the highest available." To judge by the other magazines, what's available seems to be that dull competent hackwork that is losing readers for science fiction.

Pfc Edward Wood US 46083573
Combat Development Dept.
9470 TU, Det 2
Ft. Huachuca, Ariz.

- We're not only "sick and tired of all this gloom"—we're determined to do something about lifting the pall! The "sameness" in today's science fiction is not the fault of the writers—not by a long shot! The fault lies squarely with the editors in

the field, for writers find themselves necessarily reflecting the tastes of the editors. If the editor cannot adjust to changing tastes on the part of his audience, if he continues to buy the same merchandise for resale to his market in spite of the fact that the market is no longer interested in his product—then the editor must become as obsolete as what he offers for sale. We do not intend to fit that description. We firmly believe we have a way of reviving reader interest in science fiction—and right now we're working on plans to meet the evils of "sameness" in today's fiction (an evil that is not characteristic of science fiction alone).—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Just a short note to tell you what I thought about the stories in the May issue of *Amazing*. Recently you seem to be very sensitive to reader opinion because of your change of policy, so I aim to get in on this. Maybe you'll end up being more liable to print the kind of stories I especially like.

By the way, how about tabulating the readers' votes on the merits of the stories and print them. Half the fun of reading a story is to see how others agree with you.

In the May issue, "The Chained Man" was best, followed very closely by "King of the Black Sunrise." Both these stories were not first class, but enjoyable nevertheless. Not far behind was "The Siren of Crossus." Oh, for a longer and more serious version! Four was "The Cosmic Frame." It disgusted me and I don't like to be disgusted. I know some others will rate it higher. Last was "How the Land Lies." This is just too complicated and I don't like intangible other-world creatures, anyway.

I hope you aren't going to review those fan magazines so thoroughly each issue.

Lawrence Shovlin
11760 Kilbourne
Detroit 13, Michigan

• *We like getting letters listing each issue's stories in the order of their merit. But to publish a lot of them would, we believe, only bore most readers. Perhaps we could run a sort of box score each issue showing how the stories placed in the previous month. We're open to suggestions on this.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Try as you may to bring it back, the flavor of the old *Amazing* is gone forever. The return of the features is a good idea, but this thing of running "strong" action stories is not, in my opinion, a good idea.

As you stated in your editorial, the days of the Palmer *Amazing* were the days of the friendly AS. You went on to say that they were gone forever. The reasons given were: smaller number of pages, newer authors, and changes in fandom's idea of what represented science fiction.

I hold that you are wrong on all three counts. Firstly, I don't believe that the number of pages has anything to do with the flavor of a magazine; not with ASF, and Other Worlds. Secondly, the change in authors shouldn't hold a good editor back. The editor should develop his own school of writers, if his readers show a preference. Campbell, Palmer and Gold have all done this.

The third of your reasons holds some water, fandom's tastes have changed. Today's reader has slightly more adult tastes than the reader of a decade ago, but not as wholly adult as some writers and editors seem to think. The thing is that what was good ten years ago isn't good today.

You state that you're returning to the "strong stories," as opposed to the adult s-f you were previously printing. If this means that you're abandoning the sex and sadism that characterized *Amazing* venture into "adult" s-f, fine. But please don't try to foist off 1945 fiction as a modern edition of *Amazing Stories*.

John G. Trimble
2450 Easy Avenue
Long Beach 10, Cal.

• Okay, maybe you're right. Maybe the "flavor of the old Amazing" is "gone forever." But that doesn't mean we can't come up with a better flavor—and, brother, we're going to! A "personality" in a magazine is fine and necessary; but it is not enough. The fiction has got to be something so good, so right, that readers are going to read it, come hell, high water, or TV! You're quite correct in saying the number of pages doesn't determine the "flavor of a magazine." Again—and we can't repeat this too often—it is the fiction on the pages. We

hold that it is the mark of a capable editor to make sure his writers adjust to changing tastes on the part of his audience. It's all well and good to scream about the necessity for putting out "adult" science fiction—only first the editor must know what constitutes "adult" anything!—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I do not know if I am in the majority or the minority but I would like to tell you how much I agree with the article Villiers Gerson wrote in the July issue of *Amazing*. As for me I would much rather read "But the Planet Died" than "The Man Who Talked to Bees," although it was good for its surprise ending.

I believe as Gerson said the S-F trend is too much toward things as Esp, psi powers, and such, as I think you have done in *Amazing*.

Could you tell me if I am in the minority or not in wanting to get back to space and time stories?

P. S. Only one more thing in "These Bones For Hire"; the Chems weren't supposed to have umbilical scars, well look closely at the cover or isn't the cover supposed to be part of the stories?

David Ray
c/o M Sgt. C. E. Carrie
110 6th St.
Edwards, Calif.

• *Gerson's ideas are strictly his own and we would not dream of asking him to slant them to conform with editorial policy on the fiction we run. . . . We're running space and time stories right along. . . . Valigursky knows that human beings have umbilical scars and his artistic integrity refuses to make allowances for any such nonsense as Chems! Consequently, he and Guthrie aren't speaking these days!—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Although I notice some fans are objecting to Gerson as a reviewer, I would like to hand him some praise. One factor of his reviews which especially pleases me is the way he comes right out and states his beliefs on the merits of a book. This is one of the chief characteristics of a good reviewer in my

estimation even though I may not personally agree with him.

As to Roger De Soto's fan column, I will wait until next time as he suggests.

By all means keep on encouraging Mark Guthrie and other similar young writers. His story shows promise of yet better to come, and I will look for his name in the future issues of the "pro-zines."

Daniel G. Rose
Box 734
Seward, Alaska

• *It becomes more and more evident that science fiction must turn to writers who have fresh ideas and the uninhibited approach to the field if it is to go on. We're doing our damnedest to find such talent; it must be there somewhere. One of these days a writer is going to come up with something—a style, a new concept, a fresh slant—that will revolutionize the entire medium . . . and we want to be the magazine that will put it into print.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

In re C. T. Beck's letter in your May issue—the digest size is preferable, to me anyhow, because—1. easier to read printing. 2. easier to stash and file. and 3. NO blasted truss ads.

This last, obviously is one of the reasons for the higher price, and I for one am happy to pay for not having my reading interrupted by "Throw Away That Truss" and such like.

As for book reviews—yes, I'm in favor, though I've usually read the books by the time the reviews come out.

No fanzine reviews, thanks; and edit, if you please, out all mention of previous stories and illos in letters otherwise worth printing (you know—the "I rate this-and-so over this-and-such" etc.)

Lion Harvey
313 E. 75th St.
N. Y. C. 21, N. Y.

• *Despite the agony of readers who dislike the digest-sized magazine, it seems it's here to stay, for reasons already discussed. . . . Fanzines are very important, it seems to a fair-*

sized group of our readers, so the column will remain; just as the letter-writers who talk about previous stories and illustrations have a right to be heard.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I suppose I should thank you for saving me money through your retreat to pre-teen-age level STF, but somehow the heart isn't in me to do so.

We have little enough science fiction for adults in magazine form as it is, and your attempt will be missed, though not as much as it would be if you had succeeded more often. Has it crossed your publisher's mind that perhaps the sales trouble lay in too little, rather than too much story sophistication?

As to the letter department—have one by all means if you intend to publish an "action" magazine. It fits. I may return once a year or so to see if you've set a newer course.

Jay C. Franklin

• *We're going to miss you, Jay. But nobody can follow two different paths simultaneously—and the "action" story is the one we're taking—and good, solid, exciting action at that.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Came the July AS, and so it's time for a letter. To take first things first, the cover. It was good, much better than Valigursky's effort on the May issue. This one reminded me of some of Finlay's early work. In technique, that is, not in subject matter. Speaking of Finlay, why don't you try to get some more of his work?

"These Bones for Hire" was just run-of-the-mill adventure. I've read westerns with much the same plot. If that is a fair sample of your new policy by all means drop it. "Be My Guest" was a little better. An old, old theme but well, and somewhat chillingly, presented. Is Stanley a pseudo?

"But the Planet Died" falls into the category of the first story. Not bad enough to actually dislike, but not good enough to stick in your mind. The last story, "The Man Who Talked to Bees" was the best in the issue, by a long way. Jorgensen can always write a good one.

The departments are fine. Especially De Soto's *The Revolv-*
... OR SO YOU SAY

ing Fan. Gerson's column strikes me as being just another book review. Whatever that means. Glad to see "The Observatory" back. I liked your editorial and agreed with it. The letter section was fine. I particularly liked Moskowitz's letter. That covers it I guess. On the whole, just a fair issue. Hope I won't be able to say that about the next one.

Barry Hardner
Box 201
Deport, Texas

• *Almost every science-fiction magazine in the field is after Valigursky to do coverwork for them. But we know a good thing when we see it, which is why we're keeping him too busy to accept other commitments in the field. . . . We don't think the two stories you mention are run-of-the-mill adventure at all. "Adventure"—yes; but distinctly well above average. . . . Finlay? We understand he's holding down a full-time job that won't allow time for outside work. If the rumor is wrong, we'd like to hear about it.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Finished the July issue of *Amazing Stories*. What an issue! I enjoyed every page. The revamping did a world of good. Shall we say a booster shot?

The department "The Spectroscope" was very interesting. I noticed a deciding factor in the past six months. There's too many so called writers dishing out science fiction stories that aren't up to par.

If we could stick to Bradbury, Vonnegut, Kornbluth, etc., there wouldn't be a slump in our field.

As for myself, I love deep-space dramas, lots of technical talk, but many readers love the fantasy side.

You people have to please both sides, which is a tough job.

Anyway, keep it up. *Amazing* will continue to be the leader.

N. C. Brandt
1725 Seminaus Ave.
Oakland 21, Cal.

• *Don't put all the blame on the writers, Mr. Brandt; the editors are at fault just as much, if not more. The overall*

"sameness" of s-f stories comes from the narrowness of the editorial viewpoint. Something has to be done about it, and we propose to be the one to do it! Wait and see!—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Congratulations and bravo on the new *Amazing*. I like it much better than the old.

Re the July issue, I thought "These Bones for Hire" was an exceptional piece of writing; those cartoons are good, too.

I'm happy to note that I'm not alone in having friends who get that "you-read-that-stuff" look when they see my SF mags. But fiddle-dee-dee to them! I'll keep right on being an ardent fan.

Betty Meyer
R. R. #1
Holgate, Ohio

• "Fiddle-dee-dee" is the right reaction, Betty. Tell 'em to stick to their "confessions" magazines; the adventurous in heart will read science fiction!—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I first started reading S-F when I was 12 years old. I am now seventeen and still enjoy it very much.

The science fiction book I liked the most when I first started reading S-F was *Other Worlds*, but that has gone the way of all flesh.

One day while I was looking for a good S-F magazine to buy, I looked on the top shelf and stared at it, and bygosh it stared right back and said take me. It was *Amazing*.

Ever since that day, six years ago, I have been reading *Amazing Stories* and rate it as tops.

What I would like to know is, what ever happened to John Bloodstone? The stories he wrote on "Land Beyond the Lens" were so good I know them by heart. Please bring him back, soon.

James Baratono
3145 Army St.
San Francisco, Cal.

• *Maybe Bloodstone won't be back; we haven't heard*
... OR SO YOU SAY

from him for a long, long time. But we know a couple of boys who are as good; right now they're waiting for assignments.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

Hey, what happened to Bill in that fine story, "How the Land Lies!" in your May issue? That danged story haunts me! And two other stories in that issue "The Chained Man" and "King of the Black Sunrise" were really tops.

In July you really hit it again with "These Bones for Hire" and "But the Planet Died." If you can keep up that pace, *Amazing Stories* is going to push all the other scific mags out of the field. Go to it, maestro!

R. D. Dowling
15 Cresent Road
Corte Madera, Cal.

• *Don't ask us what happened to Bill! All we know is that it must've been something mighty unpleasant. . . . We're not only going to keep up the pace; we're going to accelerate it like crazy!—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

I am glad to see the readers section has returned to your magazine. As many readers have seen, when you switched to the new size your magazine changed in many ways. The stories were terrible, the illustrations were about the worst I had ever seen in any magazine, and all the good departments were gone. But I kept reading your publications, but with little interest. But my patience has been rewarded; in the last few issues the stories have returned to the perfection of your pulp magazine.

Thank you Mr. Browne for bringing AS and FA back to being the best magazines on the market. I am now reading them as avidly as I did when they were a 25¢ pulp.

Newton W. Hooton
13 Buckingham St.
Cambridge, Mass.

• *It's like old times to be hearing from rootin', tootin' Newton Hooton! We sort of figured the change in policy would bring him back into the fold.—ED.*

—Continued from Back Cover



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